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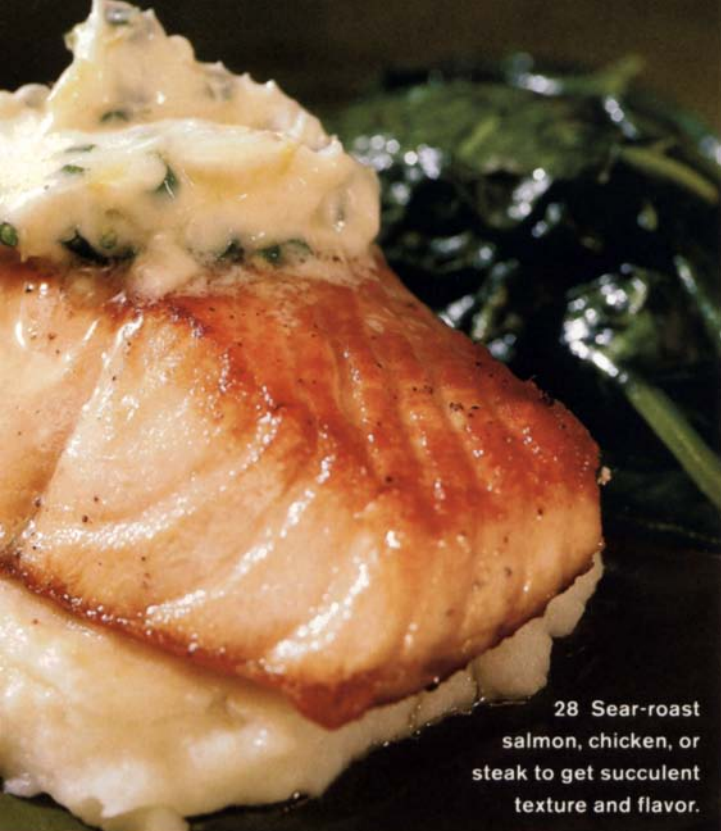
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On the cover: Classic Chocolate Truffles, p. 44.

Cover photo, Scott Phillips. These pages: top left series, Daniel Proctor; bottom left, Martha Holmberg; center, Ben Fink; below, Scott Phillips.

72 Add vibrancy to stir-fries, salads, and marinades with Thai ingredients like lemongrass, limes, and kaffir lime leaves.





"Good food is memory," says **Paula Wolfert** ("Polenta," p. 22) "At one time or another, I've had a fling with each of the recipes in my books." She has channeled a passion for enticing flavors into five cookbooks, including three on Mediterranean cooking. Paula's most recent book

is *Mediterranean Grains & Greens*, released this past fall by HarperCollins. Paula's books have received much acclaim and numerous awards, including the IACP/Julia Child Cookbook Award, the James Beard Award, and the M.F.K. Fisher Award.

Isabelle Alexandre ("Sear-Roasting," p. 28) is the chef de cuisine at Pastis restaurant in San Francisco. After training at l'Ecole Vatel in Paris and l'Ecole Hôtelière de Lausanne in Switzerland, Isabelle returned to France to work under three-star chef Georges Blanc. In the States, she has worked under acclaimed chefs Alain Rondelli and Michel Richard. When Isabelle isn't cooking at Pastis, she's likely hiking or waterskiing.



A career in naval intelligence must have prepared **Joe Verde** well for the cooking world; when he decided to make a career change, he quickly distinguished himself at Le Cirque in New York City, where he worked with Daniel Boulud, and at The Sea Grill. In 1996, when the owners of the famous Waldorf=Astoria hotel decided to revamp their landmark restaurant, Oscar's, Joe jumped at the chance to be chef de cuisine. They asked him to breathe new life into a menu of comfort classics, including meatloaf (see his article on p. 32), a job which entailed, in part, updating recipes from *The Cookbook by Oscar of the Waldorf*, originally published in 1896.

Susan Goss ("Braised Vegetables," p. 34) is the chef and co-owner of Zinfandel restaurant in Chicago, which has won praise for its ethnic American food and all-American wine and spirits list. Susan started out as an anthropology major, but a waitressing stint knocked her planned

archaeology career off the tracks. She attended New York Restaurant School before opening Zinfandel with her husband, Drew, in 1993.

James Peterson combined a California childhood, a chemistry degree, and a classic French cooking apprenticeship to master the art of cooking like no one we know. The regular author of our Techniques column, Jim is the one we turn to to explain everything from sautéing to saucemaking and, in this issue, building flavor with simple ingredients (see "The First Step for Great Flavor," p. 38). The former chef-owner of Le Petit Robert in New York City, and a former instructor at the French Culinary Institute and Peter Kump's New York Cooking School, Jim is the award-winning author of several cookbooks, including *Vegetables*, his latest. He's currently working on a techniques cookbook for Artisan.

After training under master chocolate makers like Robert Linxe and Gaston LeNôtre in Paris, **Bill Yosses** ("Classic Chocolate Truffles," p. 44) became a master of chocolate himself. He worked at several topnotch bakeries



and restaurants in France before returning to New York City to become the pastry chef at Tavern on the Green, Montrachet, and the four-star Bouley restaurant. Bill is now the pastry chef at Bouley Bakery.

Sarah Jay ("Ice-Cream Machines," p. 50) rediscovered the joys of making your own ice cream while doing the research and testing for her story. Before joining the staff of *Fine Cooking* as an associate editor, Sarah lived in Shanghai, where, she says, it's hard to find a really great vanilla.

Lily Loh ("Mu-Shu Pork," p. 54) was born in Shanghai and learned to cook from some of the best Chinese chefs. Her love of teaching and cooking inspired her to start her own Chinese cooking school after moving to California. For more than twenty years, she taught eager students in her home. Recently, Lily and her husband, George, embarked on a new adventure: volunteering for the Peace Corps. Lily is presently working as an advisor for Hospice in Martin, Slovakia, and introducing many new friends to the joys of Chinese food.



A year of blissful eating in Italy was enough to make **Toni Lydecker** ("Planning and Prepping," p. 58), a writer and editor, focus on food. Since then, she's written about everything from polenta to coffee-flavored barbecue sauces to digital thermometers. Along the way, she completed a culinary program at The New School and an internship in a Manhattan restaurant. Toni is the author of *Serves One: Super Meals for Solo Cooks*, and she recently began teaching classes on single-portion cooking.

Flo Braker ("Frangipane," p. 60), a baking consultant, instructor, and writer, has taught baking technique across the country for twenty-five years. Her books include *The Simple Art of Perfect Baking* and *Sweet Miniatures*, which won an IACP Cookbook Award in 1992 and will be reissued in 2000. Flo has written for many food magazines and newspapers and has appeared with Julia Child in PBS's "Baking with Julia," as well as on the TV Food Network's "Baker's Dozen" series. She was recently inducted into the James Beard Foundation's Who's Who of Food & Beverage in America.



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READER SERVICE NO. 40

Here's the place to share your thoughts on our recent articles or your food and cooking philosophies. Send your comments to Letters, *Fine Cooking*, PO Box 5506, Newtown, CT 06470-5506, or by e-mail to fc@taunton.com.

Searching the world for great food

I am writing to suggest that you do another Afghani menu (*Fine Cooking* #6, p. 42). I have looked for Afghani cookbooks without success, and your issue #6 is, as you know, sold out.

I've enjoyed Afghani food in Seattle and New York and would like to do so at home. You could do cooks a big favor by filling this odd information gap.

—Laura Casa, via e-mail

Editors' reply: Right now we don't have another Afghani article planned, but we were very interested to know that Laura Casa was looking for more information on this type of cuisine. What other cuisines do people want to learn about? Is it difficult to get

unusual ingredients in parts of the country? If you can't find an ingredient, do you think mail-order is a good solution? And just what is an "ethnic" cuisine today, anyway—do French and Italian count, or are they so familiar now that they don't feel international anymore? Fax, write, or e-mail us with your thoughts.

Fine Cooking invites readers to join us in California

We're very excited to announce *Fine Cooking's* first food and wine event for our readers. We've organized a three-day session of classes, visits, tours, and tastings in

northern California (both Napa and Sonoma valleys) in October 1999. The program is designed for our readers, who we feel want more than just a tourist's take on the region.

One of the most exciting parts of the event is a whole day at the Culinary Institute of America's Greystone campus, which is an incredible facility. Just looking at the state-of-the-art teaching kitchens (complete with glossy red enamel Bonnet stoves) makes you want to tie on an apron and start sautéing. Half the day will be spent at the stoves, and the other half in Greystone's amphitheater classroom at an informative wine and food pairing seminar-tasting, taught by Holly Peterson Mondavi.

We'll also be visiting some of our favorite artisan food producers—like the Webers of Della Fattoria Bakery or Bellwether Farm cheesemakers—to see what it really takes to make the soul-satisfying breads, cheeses, and other products that real cooks value so highly. John Ash, who you see frequently in our pages, will help us host a marketplace dinner featuring lots of these delicious foods. We also plan to visit master gardener Jeff Dawson at his biodynamic vegetable gardens at the Kendall-Jackson winery. Being in wine country, we'll of course see firsthand the process of turning grapes and sunshine into world-class wines.

Look for our advertisement on p. 77 to learn how to get a brochure with full program details (or call the HMS Travel Group at 800/367-5348 and say you're from *Fine Cooking*). Space is limited, so call soon.

—The editors

fine COOKING

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We're perplexed about the peppery squash soup

Readers may have noticed our caution in FC #30 about the amount of pepper in the squash soup from the Thanksgiving menu (FC #29). We had received a few calls and e-mails from people who had made the soup and found it unpalatably peppery (mostly Canadian readers, who had made the soup for their Thanksgiving, in October).

We were surprised by this because when we tested the soup originally, it was delicious and we made no changes from the author's original recipe. We checked our testing records to see if we'd made a typographical error, but didn't find any mistakes. Nonetheless, we ran the notice in the magazine and on our web site, suggesting that people start with less pepper and that the herb but-

ter was a critical ingredient—the base soup is extremely peppery without it.

In the days following American Thanksgiving, we received more reports from readers, some with the same complaint but many more with praise for the whole menu, and in particular the soup.

There is obviously a problem with this recipe, but we're not sure what it is. We thought at first that it might be a difference in the strength of various white peppers, but a more likely cause is inaccurate measurement of the squash.

Yesterday, we made two more batches of the soup, one with the buttercup squash and one with the suggested substitute, butternut squash. We followed the recipe exactly, paying special attention to how we cut and measured the leeks and squash. The recipe

calls for "chopped leeks," so we quartered them lengthwise and then cut them crosswise to produce small pieces. We rinsed and drained them well and then filled a 4-cup measure. We didn't pack them in, but we didn't leave gaps. The leeks weighed 14 ounces. The recipe next calls for "8 cups peeled, seeded, and diced (1-inch cubes)" squash. Again, we respected that 1-inch measurement, although because buttercup squash are irregularly shaped, it was impossible to get perfect cubes; we didn't let any pieces exceed about 1¼ inches. Our 8 cups of buttercup squash weighed 40 ounces, and our 8 cups of butternut squash weighed 43 ounces.

When the soup base was cooked, we added about 1 tablespoon of butter to a 1-cup serving, mixed it in, and had several people taste. The soup was delicious—not hot, but indeed highly seasoned.

Where we seem to have gone wrong in our recipe was by not specifying the amount of butter needed per serving and by not realizing that if someone made the soup base with slightly less squash or leeks, then it would cross the line between highly seasoned and too hot. We offer our heartfelt apologies to anyone whose soup did not turn out well; we know how important Thanksgiving dinner is. We're working on ways to make our recipes even more explicit so nothing like this happens again.

Here are excerpts from some of the reports we've received so far:

◆ "...unquestionably the soup is too peppery without the herb butter; with the appropri-

ate amount of herb butter, it is absolutely wonderful and not too peppery."

—Susan Rothstein, via e-mail

◆ "I am very angry that I spent most of my morning cutting and dicing only to find that your recipe didn't have the proper amounts of spices. The soup was too peppery. I took your advice and put the herb butter into the soup hoping it would improve the taste. No go. Right down the drain."

—Carole Pratt, via e-mail

◆ "This year, I boldly went where I'd never gone before: cooking and hosting my first Thanksgiving feast. While it was a risk to experiment on my guests, I took the chance with Michael Brisson's menu. My confidence was well justified. Though I'm a strictly amateur cook, the results I achieved with his recipes have left my friends thinking I'm a culinary goddess!... Let me not forget the buttercup squash soup; we inhaled it, and I made it again the next day to accompany the leftovers."

—Daniela Gitlin, via e-mail

◆ "Following the recipe for the butternut squash soup nearly ruined our Thanksgiving. Everything was fine until that last *tablespoon* of white pepper—which rendered the soup inedible."

—Doug Berman &

Billi Romain, via e-mail

◆ "This was the first time in memory that we had no leftovers save for the turkey itself, and that only because we had a twenty-pounder to ensure leftovers for sandwiches. There was nothing on the table that wasn't avidly attacked and savoured, but I believe the squash and leek soup was the hit of the day."

—Dick Watson, via e-mail ◆

Getting the most from *Fine Cooking's* recipes

When you cook from a *Fine Cooking* recipe, we want you to get as good a result as we did in our test kitchen, so we recommend that you follow the guidelines below in addition to the recipe instructions.

Before you start to cook, read the recipe completely. Gather the ingredients and prepare them as directed in the recipe list before proceeding to the method. Give your oven plenty of time to heat to the temperature in the recipe; use an oven thermometer to check.

Always start checking for doneness a few minutes before the suggested time in the recipe. For meat and poultry, use an instant-read thermometer.

In baking recipes especially, the amounts of some ingredients (flour, butter, nuts, etc.) are listed by weight (pounds, ounces) and by volume (cups, tablespoons). Professional bakers measure by weight for consistent results, but we list volume measures too because not many home cooks have scales (although we highly recommend them—see *Fine Cooking* #13, p. 68, and #17, p. 62).

To measure flour by volume, stir the flour and then lightly spoon it into a dry measure and level it with a knife; don't shake or tap the cup. Measure liquids in glass or plastic liquid measuring cups.

Unless otherwise noted, assume that

- ◆ Butter is unsalted.
- ◆ Eggs are large (about 2 ounces each).
- ◆ Flour is all-purpose (don't sift unless directed to).
- ◆ Sugar is granulated.
- ◆ Garlic, onions, and fresh ginger are peeled.
- ◆ Fresh herbs, greens, and lettuces are washed and dried.

Have a question of general interest about cooking?

Send it to *Fine Cooking*, PO Box 5506, Newtown, CT 06470-5506, or e-mail us at fc@taunton.com, and we'll find a cooking professional with the answer.

Caring for wooden utensils and cutting boards

Are wooden cutting boards better than other materials for preparing foods? What about bacterial growth? Can you use the same wooden spoon to stir tomato sauce one day and cream butter and sugar the next? How should I clean wooden tools? Are some kinds of wood better than others?

—James Arney,
Morganton, NC;
Debbie Simon, Lander, WY

Eve Felder replies: Wooden utensils and cutting boards take a bit more care, but they're surely worth it.

For cooking, I much prefer wooden spoons and spatulas to metal ones, primarily because they're less abusive to the food and to the pan. I'm less likely to end up crushing tender foods such as shell beans or risotto if I stir with a wooden spoon. Wooden utensils won't discolor food, they're poor heat conductors, they come in many shapes and sizes, and, finally, they just feel good in my hand.

Whether wooden cutting boards harbor or hinder harmful bacteria is still unclear. Recent studies at the University of Wisconsin

suggested that wood has antibacterial properties that make it more sanitary than plastic. But further research has since refuted those initial studies, and so the best practice is to maintain two cutting boards: a plastic one (without nicks or cuts) for meat and poultry, and a wooden one for fruits and vegetables.

The best cleaning method for wooden utensils is a simple washing with hot water and detergent. As long as it smells all right, you needn't fear using a wooden utensil first to stir tomato sauce, cleaning it thoroughly, and then using it to stir *crème anglaise*. Clean cutting boards the same way, but if you've used the board for raw meat or poultry, add a bit of bleach to the soapy water—one or two teaspoons per quart of water is enough. If you want, rub a wooden board with mineral oil after several uses. Don't soak wooden utensils or boards in water or put them in the dishwasher because they're liable to crack.

A butcher-block table takes a bit more effort to clean. Add a small amount of bleach to a bowl of warm soapy water. Wash the table down with a coarse scrub pad, and then scrape the surface with a stainless-steel bench

scraper (the kind used for cutting bread dough). Rinse the butcher block again with clean warm water, dry it, and then rub the surface with mineral oil, wiping off the excess.

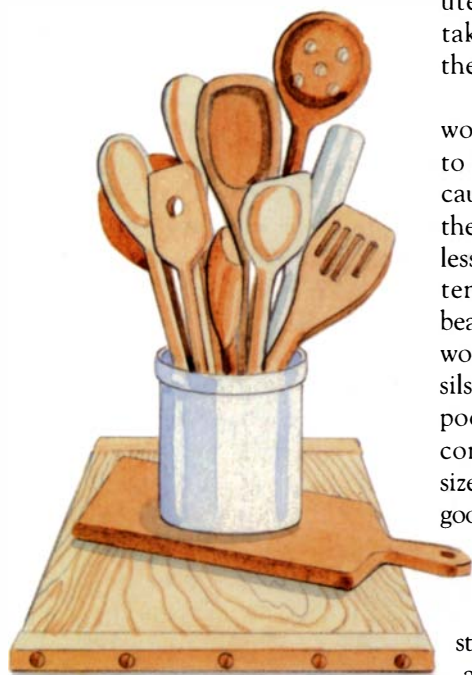
Hardwoods are best for any cooking utensil or board. Maple is ideal, as are olive, cherry, and beech. These are all slow-growing trees; hence their wood has a tight grain and isn't as porous as trees that mature quickly, such as pine. Hardwood won't absorb as many odors and isn't as prone to warping or cracking. *Eve Felder is a chef-instructor at the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, New York.*

What makes a great balsamic vinegar?

I'd love to buy some good balsamic vinegar, but I don't know how to assess quality. How long should it be aged? How much should I expect to pay? And what is the "MO" designation?

—Suzanne McGrath,
Jamestown, RI

Paul Bertolli replies: To be sure you're buying high-quality balsamic vinegar, look for the phrase *Aceto Balsamico Tradizionale di Modena* or *Aceto Balsamico Tradizionale di Reggio Emilia* on the bottle.



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Both of these label designations are controlled by law and administered by a consortium in their respective cities. (MO, by the way, stands for Modena and by itself has no bearing on quality.)

Unless you see *tradizionale* on the label, you can't be sure you're buying the genuine article rather than an imitation. Tradizionale vinegars are slow-fermented products aged in wooden casks in an aging room, or *acetaia*, in the attic of a house or estate. The wood aging, which can last from twelve years to more than a hundred, develops the vinegar's flavor, viscosity, and complexity.

Tradizionale balsamico is round, mellow, and integrated with lingering complex flavors and a dense, syrupy consistency. Long-aged tradizionale balsamics (older than twelve years) can range from \$75 to \$200 or more for a 100ml (3.3-ounce) bottle. (The price drops dramatically for younger balsamics, to \$20 or \$30 for a 250ml bottle of an eight- or ten-year-old vinegar.) Long-aged balsamic vinegar deserves special treatment in the kitchen. Don't use it in spicy or complicated dishes. Instead, savor it as a lone condiment to prime beef, tuna, or peaches. The Italians might even sip it straight.

Unfortunately, almost all of the balsamic vinegar found in American markets is imitation balsamic, which is often just a blend of sweet concentrated grape juice and strong vinegar. The imitations may or may not have been aged in wood.



While they are downright cheap compared to the *tradizionale*s, they are also comparatively thinner in consistency, they tend to exhibit an unintegrated sweet-sourness, and they have none of the complexity of the long-aged balsamic vinegars.

Paul Bertolli, chef-owner of Oliveto in Berkeley, California, and a contributing editor for Fine Cooking, makes his own balsamic vinegar.

Preserving crunch in homemade pickles

Every year, a friend and I ferment and then can about 125 jars of kosher-style pickles, but in the last two years, the pickles have gone soft in the jar. We used to have crunchy pickles all year. What happened?

—Bob Edelstein, Edina, MN

Linda Ziedrich replies: Kosher-style pickles are made from whole cucumbers that are fermented by being immersed in brine for one to three weeks or longer. Garlic is usually added; sugar and vinegar are not. The brine firms the cucumbers by drawing out their water. At the same time, bacteria that are naturally present on the cucumber produce lactic acid, giving the pickle its characteristic sour flavor.

If the cucumbers got soft during fermentation, it could be that their blossom ends weren't completely removed, the brine was too weak, the room temperature too high, or the brine wasn't skimmed frequently enough.

If the pickles were crisp after fermentation but lost their firm texture after they were canned, the softening might have occurred during heat processing. The USDA recommends processing jars of cucumber pickles in a boiling water bath—10 minutes for pints, 15 minutes for quarts. This much heat, unfortunately, can make pickles soft. You might instead try the low-temperature pasteurization method, in which the jars are immersed for 30 minutes in a water bath held between 180° and 185°F (no higher).

Perhaps you're not processing your jars at all, but just heating the brine and pouring it back over the pickles. In this case, make sure you start with hot, sterile jars, submerge the pickles well, and check the jars often; yeast or mold growing at the top of a jar can make the pickles soft. Exposure to heat, freezing temperatures, or light will also decrease a pickle's shelf-life.

Linda Ziedrich troubleshoots pickling problems in her book, The Joy of Pickling (Harvard Common Press).



Why might sugar crystallize before turning to caramel?

I recently began making caramel myself, but the last two times I've tried, the sugar crystallized before it became

caramel. It was very humid on those days. Could that have been the problem?

—Becky Johnson, Nonesuch, KY

Melanie Underwood replies: High humidity might cause your caramel to be sticky, but it's unlikely that it would cause it to crystallize.

Caramel is usually made by first dissolving sugar in water, and then boiling the sugar syrup until it takes on a color ranging from light tan to dark amber. As the water evaporates, the sugar molecules get crowded together (at this point, the solution is said to be supersaturated). As a result, the sugar molecules have a very strong tendency to grab onto each other and form crystals. Just one crystal can start a chain reaction, ruining the whole syrup very quickly.

Factors that can precipitate crystallization include movement, stirring, undissolved sugar particles on the side of the pan, or even dust. So, to prevent crystallization, don't stir the syrup once it comes to a boil. Brush down the sides

of the pan with a pastry brush dipped in cold water, or else cover the pan for the first few minutes of boiling (the condensation will dissolve any sugar left on the sides of the pan).

Adding cream of tartar, corn syrup, honey, or lemon juice to the mixture also helps prevent crystallization, essentially by obstructing the path between sugar molecules, so it's harder for them to latch together and form crystals.

Pastry chef Melanie Underwood is an instructor at Peter Kump's New York Cooking School. ♦

Sweet-hot ginger chips are perfect for baking

I love the kick of flavor that crystallized ginger gives to cookies, cakes, and muffins. But often I run into a batch that's rock-hard, or that tastes more bitter than spicy. A new product from The Ginger People called Baker's Cut Crystallized Ginger Chips has solved that problem.



These little morsels of the best Australian baby ginger are lightly coated with cane sugar and have a delightfully tender texture and a perfectly balanced sweet-hot flavor. The chips, cut no bigger than a pencil eraser, are the perfect size for baking—and delicious for snacking, too. A 7-ounce can is available in specialty groceries for about \$4.50. For more information, check out the company's web site, www.gingerpeople.com, or call Royal Pacific Foods (800/551-5284).

—Susie Middleton,
associate editor, *Fine Cooking*

Fine Cooking on the Net

We hope you've visited our web site, www.finecooking.com, to see the videos that are companions to some of our features. The site also has technique classes, articles, sources, ingredient information, food science, recipes, and of course links to other Taunton magazines and books. Now you can also find *Fine Cooking* at a terrific new web site called **Cooking.com**, where you can shop for equipment, learn about featured chefs, preview recipes from just-published books, and learn new techniques. *Fine Cooking* provides recipes and instructional articles in the "advice" department, so check it out.



Prize-winning aged goat's milk cheese

I first tasted Cypress Grove's Humboldt Fog chèvre while travelling in Napa County, California, when I stopped at a small grocer, ravenous for a little bread and cheese. Gently tangy and smooth, that aged goat cheese was just what I wanted, and I've craved it long since.

But you needn't cross the country to taste Cypress Grove's Humboldt Fog: this artisan goat cheese is now available by mail and in gourmet shops.

Humboldt Fog (which has bested stiff competition at American Cheese Society artisan cheese judgments) has a mildly earthy character, with no trace of the somewhat acrid flavor and chalky texture that some mass-produced goat cheese can have. Let your friends who say they don't like goat cheese try this one—I bet they'll love it. The coating

of edible vegetable ash on the surface and through the middle of Humboldt Fog has no flavor of its own, yet in cloaking the cheese as it ages, it adds to the pleasantly earthy flavor. (It also helps to give the cheese the look of a foggy morning in Humboldt County, California.)

I wanted to pair a wine with this terrific cheese, so I first tried a grassy Sauvignon Blanc, but it overpowered the cheese. Better choices are Chenin Blanc and Pinot Gris—still acidic, but softer.

To order Humboldt Fog directly from Cypress Grove, call 707/839-3168. An 11- to 14-ounce round costs about \$20, including ice pack and second-day delivery. Murray's Cheese in New York City (888/692-4339) will also ship it.

—Amy Albert,
associate editor,
Fine Cooking

True Blues get a grip in the kitchen

Next to a sharp knife, a pair of heavy-duty rubber gloves is one of my most valued kitchen helpers. I particularly like a pair called True Blues, which are made of cotton-lined vinyl (not latex, which irritates some people's hands). These thick gloves are contoured for a snug fit, so I get a great range of movement and my fingers stay flexible. I especially like the gloves' textured exterior, which makes holding onto slippery, soapy glasses and dishes much easier. I've even worn the

gloves while shucking oysters and handling hot nut brittle. A run through the dishwasher or washing machine is all True Blues need to be ready for the next task. True Blues come in three sizes, and they're available in most Williams-Sonoma stores for about \$10. Or call Star Kitchen (425/455-0289) for more information.

—Abigail Johnson Dodge,
test kitchen director, *Fine Cooking*



Photos: Scott Phillips

Cyberkitchen: Specialty foods online

If you like to buy the best-quality ingredients but you don't live next door to a complete specialty grocer, why not try the Internet for mail-order food sites? For example, www.dean-deluca.com has artisan cheeses and caviar, fresh truffles and smoked fish, aged meats, herbs and spices, honey and maple syrup, oils and vinegars, vanilla beans and chocolate—you name it. Visit www.greatfood.com for dozens of high-quality purveyors, including Grafton Village for Cheddar cheese, D'Artagnan for foie gras, Calio Groves for California extra-virgin olive oil, and Lobster Gram for fresh Maine lobsters. For top-quality specialty meats, check out www.goodheart.com: this site has venison, venison sausage, wild boar, bison, Kobe beef, Argentine beef, ostrich, duck, duck confit, smoked magret breast, quail, squab, pheasant, poussin, and rabbit. And for a huge selection of the best-quality coffees and teas from around the world, stop by www.junglesque.com.

Farro, an ancient Italian grain, is a new hit with American chefs

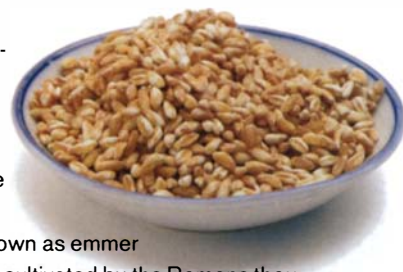
Italians call it *cucina povera*, or "peasant cooking," but in America today we call it fashionable eating. Fortunately, this time fashionable means satisfying and nutritious. More and more rustic grains are popping up on the hottest restaurant menus. One of my current favorites is farro, a wheat grain that's also known as emmer

(and is often confused with spelt). Farro was cultivated by the Romans thousands of years ago; Italians continue to use it in soups, salads, pilafs, and stuffings. I like to cook farro and cannellini bean soup, farro "risotto" with wild mushrooms, and farro salad with tomatoes and pesto.

Farro has a nutty flavor with a slightly crunchy texture. It resembles a grain of rice wrapped in a light reddish-brown hull, and cooking it is simple. Soak it in cold water for 3 to 4 hours and drain (a shorter soak will require longer cooking). Put it in a saucepan covered with plenty of water and simmer until tender, 15 to 20 minutes, or cook it as you would risotto after soaking.

Farro is sold in gourmet stores like Dean & DeLuca for around \$5 per pound. Call Murray's by Mail (888/692-4339) to mail-order. Manicaretti (800/799-9830) imports farro and can provide retail information. Or check health-food stores, but be sure you're buying emmer wheat and not spelt.

—Joanne Weir, cooking teacher and cookbook author, San Francisco

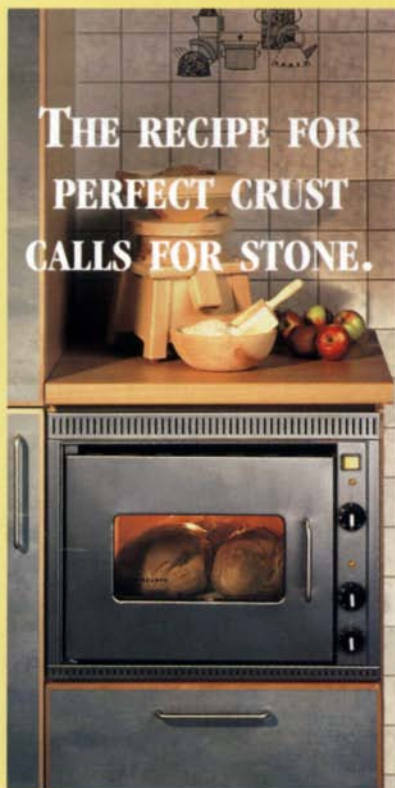


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Asian Vegetables for All Kinds of Cooking



Chinese white cabbage (bok choy) is the ultimate stir-fry vegetable. Look for heads with straight stalks and deep green leaves. Bok choy has a slightly sweet, mild cabbagey-turnip flavor and juicy stalks. Chop the stalks and leaves to stir-fry with scallions, fresh ginger, and garlic; finish with a little soy or Thai peanut sauce, or stir the chopped stalks into a Chinese-style chicken soup.

If you tend to relegate Asian vegetables to the exotic category, only encountered as restaurant fare, take another look. More and more, crisp, tasty, and nutritious Asian vegetables are turning up at markets all over the country—and these cooler winter months are the perfect time to explore their bright flavors.

Look for crisp leaves with strong, clear color and firm, crunchy-looking stalks. Avoid examples that look like they have had too many old wilted leaves trimmed off, are bruised or yellowed, or have limp leaves or stems. Try to shop at a store that mainstreams these vegetables, rather than one that displays a few

worn-out examples in the unusual produce section.

City center and year-round farmers' markets are good sources, especially if your town has a significant population of folks from the Pacific Rim. Don't be shy about asking fellow shoppers or the produce managers for their favorite ways to use these vegetables. I've learned some of my best recipes this way.

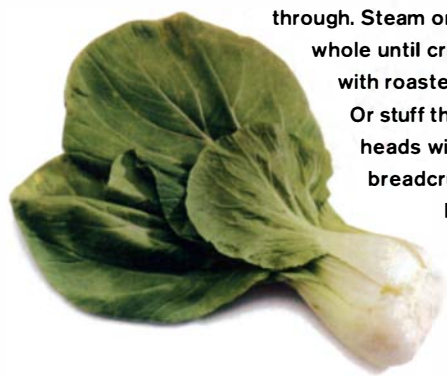
Renee Shepherd is a longtime gardening cook and seed merchant. Her company, Renee's Garden, offers gourmet seed packets at independent nurseries across the country. ♦



Daikon is sweet, sharp, and often spicy when raw; its texture is like that of a juicy turnip. Look for daikon that feel firm and heavy for their size. When you cook daikon, its milk-white flesh becomes translucent and gets sweeter. I like to make a salad with peeled and shredded daikon tossed with rice vinegar and soy sauce. Cooked, sliced daikon adds substance and mellow flavor to soups and stews.

Baby bok choy is often available at a very young stage with just four or six tender leaves. It's sweet and juicy, and it's delicious cooked simply so the melting tenderness comes through. Steam or sauté baby heads whole until crisp-tender to serve with roasted pork or chicken.

Or stuff these little vase-shaped heads with crisped pancetta, breadcrumbs, and herbs, and braise them in a flavorful chicken broth.



Chinese broccoli (gai lan) is a striking flowering vegetable that's good to eat both when stalks are just budded or when the white flowers are open. Look for thick, crisp stalks and for buds and flowers that look fresh, not limp. Gai lan has a sweet, nutty, broccoli-like flavor; it's the least cabbagey-tasting of all Asian greens. Steam briefly as you would asparagus, or stir-fry to serve over fluffy rice.



Chinese cabbage, also called **Napa cabbage (pei tsai)**, is juicy, with a mild flavor that's like an extra-sweet cabbage with mild radish overtones. Look for large, firm, tight heads that feel heavy for their size, with no discolored leaves. Chinese cabbage is delicious shredded into a simple salad with a fruity vinaigrette or sweet-and-sour dressing. Blanch its large leaves and stuff them with a seafood or sausage filling. Or braise it in rich chicken stock, where it becomes silky and succulent.



Long beans (dow gok) grow up to a foot and a half long and can be light or dark green.

Look for thin, unblemished beans with undeveloped seeds. They should break cleanly when snapped. Use long beans soon after buying, and keep them loosely wrapped, as moisture makes them limp. Long beans are delicious broken up and served with other raw fresh vegetables and your favorite dip, or stir-fried with a black bean and garlic sauce.



Asian vegetables bring rich color, graceful forms, and mouth-pleasing texture to winter meals.



Asian eggplant range from short and plump to long and slender. They come in gorgeous colors: purple, magenta, pink, creamy white, light green, or even delicately striped. They're thinner and more tender-skinned than their larger cousins, with creamy, mild flesh. Choose fruits that are firm and shiny; avoid limp or dull-skinned fruits. Fresh Asian eggplant aren't bitter under the skin, so they never need salting or peeling. Halve lengthwise, brush with oil, and grill until tender. Or slice into ½-inch coins to toss into a vegetable sauté.

Snow peas should be crisp and sweet. Look for bright, unblemished, flat pods with barely formed minuscule peas inside. Bend a pod—it should be fresh enough to snap in half. Snow peas are delicious chopped into 1-inch pieces and tossed into green salads. Sauté them with chunks of yellow summer squash and carrot coins. Cook snow peas briefly—they'll lose crispness after 30 to 45 seconds.



For Rice at Its Best, Let It Rest

How often and how much rice you cook depends in part on where you or your parents were born (in my case, India). We rice eaters joke about the puny half-cup serving size suggested on boxes of rice in the United States. An American friend cooking for a visiting Nepalese delegation found that just one guest ate most of what the package said would serve twelve.

Aside from differences in culture, many Americans shy away from rice due to a fear of cooking it. (Hence the popularity of instant rice, which offers “perfect” rice—in exchange for flavor and texture.) While exactly how rice cooks changes from variety to variety, even from batch to batch (brown rice cooks longer than

white, for example; old rice absorbs more water than new) getting consistently good results is not impossible. In fact, the method that works best is practically the same as the one on the back of the box. But what the back of the box neglects to mention is the importance of letting the rice rest before serving it.

Winnowing, washing, soaking

These days, most rice comes free of dirt, gravel, and chaff so there’s rarely a need to patiently pick through it. Washing rice is another matter. Outside the U.S., talc is still sometimes used as a milling aid and should be rinsed off in a few changes of cold water. Though rice with talc should



Perfectly cooked rice is tasty, light, and fluffy. The grains are distinct and tender but not mushy.

be labeled as such, I rinse if there’s the slightest doubt. Some people also find that rinsing washes off loose starch, making the rice less sticky. (In the U.S., rice is enriched with vitamins, but only a small amount gets washed away if the rice is rinsed.)

Whether you soak rice depends on time and tradition. Apart from habit, the reasons for soaking rice are to

shorten the cooking time and to allow for maximum expansion of long-grain rice, particularly basmati. A soak also makes the grains a little less brittle so they’re less likely to break during cooking. If I’m using older basmati, which needs to be treated carefully if it’s not to break, I soak it first. (Recipes vary in suggested soaking times, with 30 minutes most common.) But for

Rinse, strain, boil, and then simmer



Be sure to thoroughly strain rinsed or soaked rice. Excess water can make your rice mushy.



Combine the rice and water and bring to a boil. Use 1½ to 2 cups of water per cup of rice. If adding salt or fat, swirl the pan to mix them; rough stirring could break the rice.



Lower the heat to a simmer—bubbles gently bursting on the surface—and cover. Let white rice cook for 12 minutes. Then let the rice rest off the burner, covered, for at least 5 minutes and as long as half an hour.

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most everyday meals, I skip this step and still get good results. If you do soak your rice, be sure to drain it thoroughly or you'll be using more water in cooking than you intended.

The absorption method: simple and reliable

I grew up in a household that only boiled rice and only basmati at that. We'd tip some rice into a large pot of boiling water, adjust the heat to keep the rice just dancing to the surface, and check it now and again by taking a bite. When the rice was resilient without a trace of central hardness, the water got poured off and saved for soup. To make the rice dry and fluffy, we'd tip it back into its pan, cover it, and cook it further over very low heat.

I now prefer the absorption method. In this more streamlined process, the rice is cooked in a measured amount of water so that by the time the rice is cooked, all the water has

amount for long-grain rice, the lesser for medium and short. Keep in mind that more water gives you softer, stickier rice—great for stir-fries. Less water will keep the grains more separate and result in firmer rice, a good style for rice salads.

Use a sturdy pot with a tight-fitting lid. You want a pot with a heavy base for the

Letting your rice rest enlarges the window of opportunity for serving perfectly cooked rice.

most even cooking, and one that's big enough to provide plenty of room above the rice for steam. A tight lid keeps the steam in. If your lid fits loosely, put a clean kitchen cloth between the lid and the pot. (Be sure to fold it over onto the pot so it doesn't burn.) The cloth also absorbs the water that

Once all the ingredients are combined, cover the rice and let it simmer. On an electric stove, use two burners: bring the rice to a boil on a hot burner and then immediately slide it to a burner set on low to continue cooking at a slow simmer.

After about 12 minutes, the liquid should be absorbed,

and cook over low heat to evaporate the water. Or gently turn the rice out onto a baking sheet and dry it in a low oven.

Problem: The grains are split and the rice is mushy.

Solution: Use the rice for rice pudding and start over if you have the time.

Problem: The bottom layer of rice has burned.

Solution: Run cold water over the outside of the pot's bottom to keep the burnt flavor from permeating the rest of the rice (don't add water to the rice itself). Tip out as much rice as you can salvage.

You can avoid such problems by breaking the cardinal rule of rice cooking ("never lift the lid") and actually looking to see how it's doing. I for one have done so and lived to tell the tale. A quick peek will tell you if most of the water has been absorbed and that it's time to let the rice sit off the heat. The point is to keep the lid off for just a flash.

What about rice cookers?

Whenever I travel in rice-eating regions, I ask about the favorite local method or vessel for cooking rice. Invariably, the answer is "Why, a rice cooker, of course." Rice cookers, which can cost \$25 to \$200, may be worthwhile if you cook a lot of rice. But, like cooking rice on the stovetop, it takes experience to find the amount of water that works best for your favorite rice.

My mother used to tell me that with every major new batch of rice she got, she had to adjust its cooking time. Despite modern technology, that's still a good practice.

Anthropologist Niloufer King researches, teaches, and writes on tropical food plants and cuisines, with a special interest in street food. ♦



Fluff the rice gently with a fork or chopstick. Gentle handling will keep the individual grains from breaking up into mush.

been absorbed. As the water level drops, trapped steam finishes the cooking.

For every cup of rice, use 1½ to 2 cups of water (less if the rice is washed first). You'll need to experiment a little to find the amount you like best, but in general, use the larger

would normally condense on the inside of the lid and fall back down into the rice, so this is also a good trick to get drier, fluffier rice.

A bit of butter or olive oil will also help keep the grains from sticking together, while a little salt adds flavor.

and the rice still *al dente*. If you served the rice now, you'd find the top layer drier and fluffier than the bottom, which can be very moist and fragile. Here's where you need patience. Let the rice sit off the heat, undisturbed with the lid on, for at least 5 minutes and for as long as 30. This results in a uniform texture, with the bottom layers as fluffy as the top. That a pot of rice actually improves with a rest also gives you more flexibility for cooking the rest of the meal.

Fixing not-so-perfect rice

If you follow these guidelines, perfectly cooked rice is attainable. But it's an imperfect world, and the telephone has a way of ringing at inopportune moments. So here are ways to fix rice that has turned out less than perfectly:

Problem: The rice is still very chewy or hard in the middle after the allotted time.

Solution: Add just enough water to create a little steam, ¼ cup or less. Put the lid on and cook the rice on very low heat for another 5 minutes.

Problem: The rice is cooked but too wet.

Solution: Uncover the pot



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Microwave chestnuts for easier peeling

Some people peel chestnuts by roasting them a few at a time. I use the same strategy, but I do the “roasting” in the microwave. Cut an X on the curved side of the chestnut and microwave on high, six at a time, for 40 seconds.

—Henry Troup,
Munster, Ontario

Plastic bag greases baking pan

To grease or butter a pan, I use a small plastic bag or zip-top bag. I insert my hand into the bag like a glove and use my fingers to smear the butter onto the sides and corners. If I want to store the butter for next time, I turn the bag inside out before starting. When I’m finished, I pinch the bag toward the bottom and pull it right side out. Then I can just seal the bag and freeze it until the next time I need it.

—Robin Brisco, Tustin, TX

Make a spice shaker from a canning jar

A pint-size, wide-mouth canning jar with screening wire fitted into the screw-on band makes a good shaker for dry barbecue spices, jerks, and rubs. It dispenses a wide, even shake and can also be used to store the spices if it’s sealed in plastic to keep out moisture. Regular screening wire is sold in hardware stores (just be careful when cutting the sharp edges).

—Dixie Wilson,
Olive Branch, MS

Make the blender clean itself

After using the blender to mix, purée, or liquefy food, use it once more to start cleaning it. Fill the pitcher half-way with hot water and add detergent. Cover and blend for a few seconds.

Rinse out the pitcher with fresh hot water and dry (depending on what you’ve blended, you may still need to disassemble the blade).

—Edith Ruth Muldoon,
Baldwin, NY

Keeping order in the freezer

To avoid frozen chaos in my chest-style storage freezer, I bought four plastic file-folder crates (like the old milk crates) from an office-supply store. The crates stack up and are well-ventilated. Getting to the bottom of the freezer is now just a matter of lifting out one crate. To further orga-

For a head start on cleaning the blender, add hot water and detergent and blend.



nize, each crate holds a different category of food: poultry, beef, fruits and vegetables, and breads. The crates left enough room at the top of the freezer for two large, shallow bins that hold leftovers and other items that I plan to use soon.

—Paul St. Onge,
Chandler, AZ

Sift over a paper plate

When you’re sifting flour and other dry ingredients for baking, try doing it over a paper plate. The plate is sturdy and won’t collapse like waxed paper or plastic wrap, so the ingredients slide off the plate and into your bowl without making a mess.

—Carol M. Kuehler,
Florissant, MO

Coffee filter makes a clear broth

After making chicken broth, I strain out the herbs and vegetables using a sieve. Then I strain it again through a paper coffee filter, which catches all the sediment and fat and leaves me with a crystal-clear broth.

—Leah Hitchcock,
Salinas, CA

Wrap citrus in newspaper for longer storage

If you have a lot of oranges, lemons, or other citrus fruits that you want to store for more than several days, wrap each fruit individually in a



Make a spice shaker from a canning jar and screening wire.



Keep hands clean and butter handy by greasing with a plastic bag.

sheet of newspaper. Pack them in a box or a bag, and store them in a cool, dry place. You'll want to wash any ink residue off the rind before using them.

—Jonathan Nickels,
Longmeadow, MA

Roll bacon to loosen slices

Cold slices of bacon out of the refrigerator tend to stick together, inevitably causing a few slices to tear when I try to separate them. To avoid this, I curl the whole package of bacon lengthwise into a tube, and then I roll it back and

forth a few times. This loosens the slices so I can pull them off without ripping them.

—Darlene Guzman,
Danville, CA

Play the mandoline, safely

I bought a professional mandoline, but I found the safety guard to be very limiting. A



Roll a package of cold bacon back and forth a few times to separate the slices.

few tries without the guard put my fingers in terrible jeopardy and reminded me why I bought the guard in the first place.

A solution is to use a moistened Scotch-Brite pad to hold the vegetable you're cutting. The pad's rough surface grips the vegetable, while its flexibility lets it conform to the vegetable's shape, creating a real comfort zone. Just place the pad in the palm of your hand, and don't let your fingers extend beyond the pad; if you slip, the pad gets sliced, not your hand.

Now I can slice, julienne, and waffle with confidence (waffling with confidence doesn't come easy). With a sure hand and the proper



A Scotch-Brite pad shields your fingers while slicing.

stroke, anyone can play a mandoline.

—G. Robert Jackson,
Alexandria, VA

Freeze coffee or tea

Freeze leftover coffee or tea in ice-cube trays; the cubes let you chill your iced tea or coffee without diluting it.

—Ellen Sandberg,
North Vancouver,
British Columbia ♦

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Making Creamy Polenta

With No Stirring

Forget standing vigil over the stove—oven roasting and no stirring (really) give you smooth, delicious polenta

BY PAULA WOLFERT



"Learning this method was a rite of passage, and I learned much about polenta along the way," says Paula Wolfert.

I know you'll be skeptical, but I must tell you—this method of making polenta has changed my life.

I found the method on the back of a package of Golden Pheasant polenta, but Ed Fleming, the distributor, says it's an old Tuscan peasant recipe that he found twenty years ago. I'm sure others do it this way, but making polenta without stirring was news to me.

This no-stir method—combining cornmeal, water, and a little salt in an oiled nonstick skillet and roasting it in the oven (as opposed to frequent stirring in a pot on the stove)—produces wondrous results: creamy polenta with an appetizing sheen and the voluptuous, bosomy quality that well-made polenta should have. Varying the proportion of water to cornmeal lets you adjust the polenta's consistency from runny to firm and lets the polenta take on many different guises: a simple steaming bowl served with a little grated cheese; a bed for stews

and ragoûts; layered or stirred with greens and cheese for pies or gratins; or slices or cubes to fry or grill and top with fresh herbs and cheese.

Twice the time, but worth the wait

Cooking polenta this way takes longer than if I were doing it on top of the stove, but it leaves me free to take care of the stew, greens, or whatever else I'll serve with the polenta. I also love this no-stir method because:

- ◆ I don't get tired from stirring, nor do I have to deal with a sputtering pot.
- ◆ The polenta gets an appealing toasty corn flavor and aroma from oven roasting.
- ◆ The polenta doesn't get watery because of too much liquid added at the end of cooking to thin it out before serving.

If you're used to stirring, this method will require a leap of faith, but trust me. The cornmeal and water may actually separate in the oven and not come

How to get smooth polenta without the constant stirring



Mix the cornmeal, water, and salt in a greased, ovenproof skillet, and then bake uncovered at 350°F for 40 minutes.



After 40 minutes, stir, taste for salt, and bake for another 10 minutes. If you double the recipe, double the cooking time.

Caramelized Cabbage on Creamy Polenta is a “pie” of slow-cooked cabbage with a dusting of Parmesan resting on a bed of polenta.



together for more than half the cooking time. But don't worry—they will.

A wide, deep uncovered skillet lets the cornmeal roast in the open heat

I use a wide, deep, uncovered skillet to expose a large amount of cornmeal to the open heat. This toasts the cornmeal as it cooks, teases out more flavor, and adds a roasted quality.

A large nonstick sauté pan or skillet is key. With nonstick, there's no scorching on the bottom, and the polenta slides out of the pan like a dream.

Be sure your pan is ovenproof up to 350°F, which is the temperature I'm using here to cook the polenta. I've had good results with a three-quart nonstick sauté pan by All-Clad Ltd. The 12-inch

heavy-gauge aluminum nonstick “Peking” pan developed by Joyce Chen (see Sources, p. 76) is also good, especially if you're doubling these recipes to serve eight. If you don't have a skillet, a well-oiled four-quart saucepan works, too, but the cooking may take a little longer because the pan is deeper. I've also used a small uncovered Chinese clay pot with a glazed interior and short handle, which works beautifully for smaller batches. You can find one in a Chinese market for under \$10.

A fresh bag of cornmeal smells sweet

Polenta is, of course, made from cornmeal, which you can find in supermarkets and health-food stores. A good batch smells bright and sweet; a stale batch will have a cardboardy smell and taste.

Cornmeal comes in fine, medium, medium-coarse, and coarse grinds. Here, I'm using coarse and medium-coarse grinds because I prefer the texture of the finished polenta to that produced by fine cornmeal. I think American stone-ground meal is wonderful. Imported Italian vacuum-packed cornmeal is excellent, too, but it's pricier.

Some distributors even label the box “polenta”; this is fine as long as you don't buy instant polenta, which is flavorless in comparison to its longer-cooking cousin. If the only cornmeal you can find is Quaker or another major brand name that isn't coarse, make sure that it's yellow rather than white (white is all right; it's just a little bland) and that it's a medium grind.

Try to use a bag or box of cornmeal soon after you buy it. You'll get a fresher corn taste this way. I recommend storing cornmeal in the freezer, tightly sealed (storing it in the refrigerator can produce

Vary polenta's consistency to suit the meal

Here's a chart for using medium-coarse or coarse cornmeal:

consistency	how to serve	proportions
very soft (polentina)	in a bowl, plain or with toppings	6 parts liquid to 1 part cornmeal
soft	in a bowl, plain or with toppings; as a bed for stews and ragoûts	5 parts liquid to 1 part cornmeal
firm	as a bed for stews and ragoûts; to cool and slice into wedges to fry or broil and serve with toppings	4 parts liquid to 1 part cornmeal
very firm	to cool and slice into wedges to fry, broil, or grill and serve with toppings	3 to 3½ parts liquid to 1 part cornmeal

mold). The better mills in this country dry their corn and grind it as needed, so if you can get cornmeal that has been ground recently, your polenta will be that much tastier. A few mills are listed in Sources on p. 76.

Runny, soft, or firm polenta depends on the amount of liquid

No matter what grind of cornmeal you're using, the consistency of the polenta will depend on how much water you use. Use the chart opposite to guide you. I usually use just water, but half milk and half water gives a rich, mellow flavor. Quite a few chefs I know use chicken stock, although I don't myself. Be aware that if you want to keep the polenta for a few days to use for wedges, slices, or dumplings, polenta made with stock or milk won't keep.

RECIPES

Basic Polenta Recipe

Thanks to Ed Fleming, owner of The Polenta Company, for permission to adapt the recipe printed on bags of Golden Pheasant brand polenta. Use only water and no milk if you're making polenta to use a few days from now—it will keep better this way. Use the chart opposite for a consistency guide. If you're doubling the recipe, double the cooking time. *Serves three to four as a side dish.*

- 1 cup medium-coarse or coarse cornmeal, preferably organic stone-ground**
- 3 to 6 cups water (or half water, half milk), depending on the desired consistency (see the chart opposite)**
- 1 Tbs. butter or olive oil**
- 1 tsp. salt; more to taste**

Heat the oven to 350°F. Grease a 3-qt. nonstick ovenproof skillet; pour in the cornmeal, water, milk (if using), butter, and salt and stir with a fork until blended. The mixture will separate and take more than half the cooking time to come together. Bake uncovered for 40 min. Stir the polenta, taste, add salt if needed, and bake for another 10 min. Remove from the oven and let the polenta rest in the pan for 5 min. before pouring it into a buttered bowl to scoop out and serve or onto a wooden board or pizza peel to slice into wedges.

Caramelized Cabbage on Creamy Polenta

A good-quality aged cheese is wonderful in this dish. Taste the cheese before you use it to be sure it isn't too salty. If you're doubling the recipe, double the cooking time. You can keep the "pie" hot over simmering water for up to half an hour, but it doesn't reheat well. *Fills one 9-inch pie dish; serves six.*

- 2 Tbs. extra-virgin olive oil**
- ¼ lb. chopped pancetta**
- 2 cloves garlic, minced**

Dress up a plain bowl of polenta



A simple bowl of steaming polenta is wonderfully comforting by itself, but it's also terrific with:

- ♦ a dusting of aged Parmesan.
- ♦ Gorgonzola with chopped walnuts.
- ♦ soft cheese, such as ricotta or mascarpone, stirred in.
- ♦ a heavy sprinkling of chopped herbs and a drizzle of fruity olive oil.
- ♦ a sauté of bitter greens or wild mushrooms.
- ♦ a topping of slow-cooked sliced onions.

- 1 small sprig rosemary, chopped**
- 2 lb. green, white, or Savoy cabbage, cored and thinly shredded**
- 2 tsp. salt; more to taste**
- Freshly ground black pepper to taste**
- About 3 Tbs. dry white wine (or water); more if needed**
- A few drops balsamic vinegar**
- 1 cup medium-coarse cornmeal, preferably organic stone-ground**
- 4 cups water**
- ½ tsp. olive oil**
- 1 Tbs. butter**
- 2 oz. finely grated Asiago or pecorino romano**

Prepare the cabbage—Heat the 2 Tbs. extra-virgin olive oil in a wide, deep saucepan over medium heat. Add the pancetta, garlic, and rosemary and sauté until the pancetta and garlic soften, about 4 min. Add the cabbage, ½ tsp. of the salt, the pepper, wine, and ¼ cup water; toss to coat thoroughly. Cover and cook over medium heat for about 1 hour, adding a little more water or white wine whenever the cabbage seems too dry or begins to brown too fast, checking about every 5 min. (the cabbage should stew slowly and brown lightly). After about 1 hour, uncover and cook, stirring, until the cabbage is meltingly tender, lightly caramelized, medium brown, and somewhat dry to the touch, about 5 to 10 min. Add the balsamic vinegar, taste, and adjust seasonings.

Meanwhile, prepare the polenta—Heat the oven to 350°F. In an oiled 3-qt. nonstick ovenproof skillet, combine the cornmeal, 4 cups water, the ½ tsp. olive oil, and the remaining 1 ½ tsp. salt; stir briefly. Bake uncovered for 40 min. Remove the pan from the oven, give the polenta a good stir, and return the pan to the oven to bake another 5 min. Stir in the butter and half of the cheese. Pour the polenta into a greased 9-inch heatproof dish, cover evenly with the cabbage, and scatter the remaining cheese on top. Bake until the tips of the cabbage are brown and crisp, 10 to 15 min. Serve hot.

(Turn the page for more recipes.)

Polenta is a mild and creamy partner for this savory pork stew.



When polenta firms up, it's even more versatile

Polenta firms up all by itself as it cools. I learned a neat method of shaping it from one of the cooks at Chez Panisse in Berkeley: Pour a mound of very firm polenta (3 to 3½ parts liquid to 1 part cornmeal) into a damp dishtowel, tie up the four corners, and let the polenta cool into a pillow shape. A greased loaf pan or bowl works just as well.

Slice the polenta with a taut string or a thin, sharp knife. Then serve it any number of ways:

- ◆ Fry the slices in garlic- and rosemary-scented butter or olive oil until golden. Then, eat them
 - plain as a side dish.
 - with a salad of mixed and shredded bitter greens.
 - with simple toppings of goat cheese, roasted red peppers, prosciutto, or dry sausage.



- with tomato sauce and grated Parmesan.
- ◆ Dice the slices into 1-inch dumplings, boil for 5 minutes, and then
 - top with sautéed mushrooms, Taleggio cheese, and sizzling butter.
 - add to a broth-based fish or vegetable soup.
- ◆ Layer the slices with meat sauce and cheese and bake, gratin style.

Pork with Onions & Prunes over Polenta

Be sure the oven is up to temperature before you start the polenta. Adding the white wine in stages for repeated reductions goes a long way toward deepening the flavor and color of this stew. *Serves four.*

FOR THE GLAZED ONIONS:

- 12 small white onions, an X cut in the root end, blanched, drained, and peeled
- ¼ cup water
- 1½ Tbs. butter
- 1 tsp. sugar

FOR THE PORK:

- 1½ lb. pork shoulder or butt, fat trimmed, cut into ¾-inch cubes
- 2 Tbs. olive oil
- Pinch cinnamon
- Pinch freshly ground black pepper
- Pinch dried rosemary, crumbled
- Pinch dried thyme, crumbled
- 1 cup finely chopped onion
- 1 Tbs. red-wine vinegar
- 1 Tbs. Dijon-style mustard
- 1½ cups dry white wine
- 3 cloves garlic
- 2 medium carrots, peeled, halved lengthwise, and sliced ½-inch thick
- 1 bay leaf
- Salt to taste
- 1¾ cups homemade or low-salt canned chicken stock
- 8 large dried pitted prunes, soaked in hot water to soften
- Chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley

FOR THE POLENTA:

- 1 cup medium-coarse polenta, preferably organic stone-ground
- 4 cups water
- 1 tsp. salt; more to taste

Cook the onions—In a small skillet, combine the onions, ¼ cup water, butter, and sugar; bring to a boil. Simmer, covered, until the water evaporates and the onions are just tender; about 5 min. Cook uncovered over low heat until the onions are well browned, about 8 min. Set aside, uncovered.

Start the stew—Toss the pork with the olive oil, cinnamon, pepper, rosemary, and thyme. In a heavy, 5-qt. Dutch oven, brown the pork over medium heat for about 5 min., adding no fat to the pan. Increase the heat to medium-high and sauté, stirring frequently, until any moisture has evaporated and the pork is thoroughly browned, about 10 min. Transfer the pork to a bowl. Reduce the heat to medium and add the chopped onion to the remaining pan juices. Cook until the onion is soft and starting to brown, about 6 min., and then add it to the reserved pork. Add the vinegar, mustard, and ½ cup of the wine to the pot. Heat to boiling, scraping up the brown bits that cling to the bottom of the pan. Reduce to a glaze. Add another ½ cup wine; again, reduce it to a glaze. Repeat with the last ½ cup wine. Add the garlic, carrots, and bay leaf to the pot. Return the pork, onions, and any accumulated juices to the pot, season with salt, and add the stock. Bring to a boil, cover, and reduce the heat. Simmer gently until barely tender, 45 to 55 min.

Meanwhile, start the polenta—Heat the oven to 350°F. In an oiled 3-qt. nonstick ovenproof skillet, combine the cornmeal, water, and salt. Bake uncovered for 40 min. Stir the polenta, taste, add salt if needed, and bake for another 10 min. Remove from the oven and let the polenta rest in the pan for 5 min. before pouring it onto a serving platter.

Continue the stew—After 45 min. of simmering, add the prunes and glazed onions to the meat. Continue cooking, uncovered, until the pork is very tender and the stew is thickened (about another 15 min.), stirring occasionally. Remove the pot from the heat, discard the bay leaf, and adjust the seasonings. Set aside until the polenta is ready. If necessary, gently reheat the stew to bubbling and serve on top of the hot polenta, sprinkled with chopped parsley.

Gratin of Polenta with Greens

This gratin can be a substantial side dish or a light supper. Flavoring olive oil with crushed red chile flakes makes a “red” oil to add subtle heat. Serves four as a first course or a side dish.

- 1 cup medium-coarse or coarse cornmeal, preferably organic stone-ground**
- 4 cups water**
- 1 tsp. salt; more to taste**
- 3 Tbs. olive oil**
- 1 clove garlic**
- ¼ tsp. crushed red chile flakes**
- Freshly ground black pepper to taste**
- 1 lb. mixed tender greens, such as arugula, spinach, watercress, young kale, plus a few sprigs of dill or fennel; thick stems cut away, leaves chopped coarsely**
- ⅓ cup grated pecorino romano**



Tender greens blend with smooth polenta in this warming gratin. The greens were sautéed with red chile flakes for a hint of heat.



Add a layer of texture by sprinkling the polenta with cheese and baking it for 10 minutes.

Prepare the polenta—Heat the oven to 350°F. In an oiled 3-qt. nonstick ovenproof skillet, stir together the cornmeal, water, and salt. Bake uncovered for 40 min.

Meanwhile, prepare the greens—In a very large skillet, heat the olive oil over medium-high heat. Add the garlic, chile flakes, and a pinch of black pepper; cook for 1 min. Pour half the oil into a 1½- or 2-qt. baking and serving dish, reserving the garlic in the skillet, and then pour another tablespoon into a cup to be drizzled over the final dish. Brush the seasoned oil all over the inside of the serving dish. Add the chopped greens to the oil and garlic remaining in the skillet, cover, and cook over medium heat, stirring occasionally, until wilted and tender, about 10 min. Discard the garlic. Season the greens with salt and pepper. If necessary, uncover the greens and increase the heat at the end to evaporate any liquid. (You'll have 1½ to 2 cups cooked greens.)

When the polenta has cooked 40 min., quickly stir in the greens and half the cheese until combined. Taste and add salt if needed. Transfer to the oiled ovenproof serving dish, drizzle with the reserved oil, sprinkle with the remaining cheese, and bake until the cheese is melted, another 10 min. Serve hot.

Paula Wolfert's newest book is *Mediterranean Grains & Greens* (HarperCollins). ♦



Sear-roasting has two steps: After browning one side of fish, chicken, or meat in an ovenproof pan, flip it and give it a brief blast in a super-hot oven.



"I cook this way every night at the restaurant, turning out lots of orders," says Isabelle Alexandre, "but it works just as well in an apartment kitchen."

Sear-Roasting for Crisp and Juicy Results

An ovenproof skillet and two quick steps give you fish, chicken, or steak that's seared but still tender outside, moist and perfectly done inside

BY ISABELLE ALEXANDRE



Poke the salmon to feel for doneness. With fillets this size, a two-minute roast gives you medium-rare salmon.



A simple dab of compound butter is all you need to sauce Salmon with Lemon-Ginger Butter. Isabelle Alexandre serves it on a bed of mashed potatoes with a side of spinach.

At Pastis restaurant in San Francisco, the kitchen gets pretty intense when dinner service is in full swing—heat, noise, bustle—and it's my job to make sure every dish goes out the door cooked to perfection and looking beautiful. It's often fast and furious: on a busy night, I cook more than 120 individual dinner orders. For many of them, I rely on a technique that I call sear-roasting, where I quickly brown one side of a piece of steak, chicken, or fish on the stove and then finish it in the oven with a brief roasting. The skillet searing gives a delicate, golden crust on the outside—and the enveloping blast of high heat from the oven ensures that the food cooks completely and stays moist inside without developing too much of a crust.

At the restaurant, of course, we use professional-strength burners and ovens. But cooking this way works just as well in my tiny apartment kitchen, when I have a couple of friends over for a bottle of wine and the type of dinner I'm apt to make at home—a fillet of salmon with a dollop of compound butter, a boneless chicken breast in a crushed peanut crust, or a strip steak coated with peppercorns and finished with a lusty pan sauce made with red wine and butter.

Sear outside, perfectly cooked inside

Just as the name implies, there are two steps to this cooking method. The initial searing is where you get

good color and flavor; the roasting phase gently completes the cooking without toughening the outside of the food.

Make sure you take the fish, poultry, or meat out of the refrigerator in time to bring it to room temperature so that it cooks thoroughly. It's also important that whatever you're cooking is thoroughly dry before you season it and put it into the hot pan; moisture will interfere with the browning.

A hot skillet creates a delicate, tasty crust. You'll heat the pan over a medium-high flame and use just a little bit of oil. The pan is hot enough when you see the bare beginnings of smoke. When you tilt the pan, the oil will look ripply. But I caution you, don't let the oil actually smoke: have everything right near the pan so you're ready to sear your ingredients the second your oil is hot enough.

To get that nice, brown crust, you'll need to leave the food alone in the skillet (no poking or nudging). But at the same time you need to make sure the food isn't sticking: here's where pan temperature is key. You can check by holding whatever you'll be cooking with a pair of tongs and touching one edge to the pan surface. If the pan is hot enough, the food will slide easily on the light film of oil. If it sticks, the pan needs to be hotter.

A very hot oven produces a juicy interior. You'll need to turn the oven on as soon as you start getting

ingredients together so it has plenty of time to reach 500°F. As soon as the searing part is done, you'll flip the food over and transfer the skillet to the hot oven. By the time you close the oven door and wipe down the stovetop, it will be time to check if dinner is ready.

A heavy, ovenproof skillet is an essential tool

The only equipment you need for sear-roasting is a skillet and a spatula or tongs.

Sear-roasting is a quick,
two-step process
that helps prevent overcooking.

Choose a skillet that's oven-safe up to 500°F, which is the oven temperature I'm using here. Obviously, a pan with a wooden or plastic handle is not acceptable.

Heavy-duty aluminum, an aluminum-stainless combination, cast iron, or commercial-weight nonstick all work well (Anolon and Circulon Commercial nonstick pans, available in most well-stocked kitchen stores, are both safe up to 500°F). I'd advise against nonstick for the steak, though, because the recipe involves making a sauce by deglazing the brown bits that stick to the pan.

If your skillet is small, work in two batches. When you crowd the pan, you run the risk of each



Chicken with a Crushed Peanut Crust contrasts a crunchy nut crust with juicy, tender breast meat.

piece of meat or fish steaming and not getting the intense heat it needs to create a proper crust. If you're making any of these recipes for a dinner party, you could use more than one skillet or sear in batches.

The pan—and the handle— will be blazing hot, so watch out

A final safety warning: the pan's handle will be extremely hot when you take it out of the oven, so use a thick kitchen towel. As soon as you rest the skillet on the stove, the handle will be sticking out, inviting you and anyone who walks through the kitchen to grab on—and get burned. For safety's sake, I strongly advise you to adopt the restaurant kitchen habit of wrapping a dishtowel around the handle, which serves both as a shield and as a warning flag.

RECIPES

Boneless Chicken Breast with a Crushed Peanut Crust

This is delicious with a Burgundy, or a Pinot Noir from Oregon or California. Serves four.

½ cup salted peanuts

2 eggs

Pinch cayenne

½ cup all-purpose flour

**4 boneless, skinless chicken breast halves
(5 to 6 oz. each), patted dry**

Salt and freshly ground black pepper

Olive oil for the pan

Heat the oven to 500°F. In a food processor or coffee grinder, pulse the peanuts just until finely crushed; be careful not to grind them to a paste. Transfer the crushed nuts to a plate or shallow bowl. In a second plate, beat the eggs with the cayenne. Put the flour in a third plate. Line up the flour, eggs, and nuts in that order.

Between two sheets of plastic wrap, lightly pound the chicken breasts to even them out (if you don't have a mallet, use a heavy pan or the side of a cleaver). Lightly season the chicken with salt and pepper. With one hand (this will be your dry hand), dredge a chicken breast in the flour, making sure it's coated evenly. Shake off the excess. Transfer the chicken to the other hand (this will be your wet hand) and dip it in the egg. With the same hand, dredge the chicken breast on one side only in the crushed peanuts, patting to coat the chicken. Set aside, nut side down, and repeat with the three remaining chicken pieces.

Set a large cast-iron skillet over medium-high heat and add just enough oil to make a light film. When the oil is very hot, add the chicken, peanut side down, and cook until the crust is light brown, about 2 min. Flip the chicken over, put the skillet in the oven, and let the chicken roast for about 4 min. Remove the pan from the oven, check for doneness with the tip of a knife, and serve immediately.



Steak au Poivre gets finished with a simple, full-flavored pan sauce of red wine and butter.

Steak au Poivre

This dish is a classic in France and always wonderful with a *frisée* salad, french fries, and a bottle of red wine. For sear-roasting steak, a cast-iron pan works best. *Serves four.*

4 New York strip or sirloin steaks (6 to 8 oz. each),
¾ inch thick, patted dry

Salt

3 Tbs. coarsely ground black peppercorns

Olive oil for the pan

1 cup red wine (Cabernet Sauvignon or Pinot Noir)

4 to 6 Tbs. butter, sliced

Heat the oven to 500°F. Sprinkle the steaks with salt on both sides, and then press the ground peppercorns into the steaks on both sides. Set a large cast-iron skillet over medium-high heat and add just enough olive oil to make a light film. When the oil is very hot, add the steaks, cooking until nicely browned on one side, about 3 min. (If the pan is small, work in batches.) Flip the meat over and put the skillet in the oven. For medium-rare steaks, roast for 3 min. for 6-oz. steaks; 4 min. for 8-oz. steaks. Check for doneness with the tip of a knife or by pressing with your fingertips, keeping in mind that the steaks will cook a bit more as they sit. Transfer the steaks to a warm plate and tent with foil.

With a spoon, remove any fat from the skillet. Put the skillet back on the burner and heat to medium high. Add the wine and cook until it's reduced to ¼ cup, about 7 min., scraping up the browned bits with a wooden spoon. Whisk in the butter a slice at a time, whisking until completely melted. Taste and adjust the seasonings, drizzle the sauce over the steaks, and serve immediately with more sauce on the side.

Sear-Roasted Salmon Fillets with Lemon-Ginger Butter

Warming the lemon juice makes it easier to mix it into the softened butter. Wrapped well, the compound butter keeps for weeks in the freezer. *Serves four.*

6 Tbs. butter, well softened at room temperature

2 Tbs. fresh lemon juice, warmed slightly

2 Tbs. minced fresh ginger

2 Tbs. snipped fresh chives

Olive oil for the pan

4 salmon fillets (5 oz. each), skinned if you like,
patted dry

Salt and freshly ground black pepper

In a bowl, blend the butter, lemon juice, ginger, and chives well. Set aside at room temperature.

Heat the oven to 500°F. Set a large ovenproof skillet over medium-high heat and add just enough oil to make a light film. Sprinkle the salmon lightly with salt and pepper. When the oil is very hot, add the salmon, skin side up, and cook until nicely browned, about 1 min. Flip the fish over and put the skillet in the oven. Roast for 2 min. for medium rare; 4 min. for medium well. Check for doneness with the tip of a knife. Remove the pan from the oven, transfer the fish to serving plates, and immediately top the salmon with a dab of the lemon-ginger butter.

Isabelle Alexandre is the chef de cuisine at Pastis restaurant in San Francisco. ♦

More ideas for sear-roasting

Sear-roasting works best with flat cuts of meat, poultry, and fish that are at least ½ inch thick. Thinner cuts of meat, such as veal paillard, or delicate fish, such as sole, cook too quickly for sear-roasting. Try this method with:

Turbot or **halibut** seared on one side, dredged in minced parsley, breadcrumbs, and garlic, and then roasted.

Tuna steaks served with a dab of tapenade or tomato-avocado salsa.

Duck breast drizzled with a pan sauce of sherry vinegar, beef stock, and a little butter.

Center-cut lamb chops rubbed with garlic and fresh rosemary.

Pork chops served with a sauté of sliced onions, cabbage, and apples.

Veal chops with a pan sauce of rosé, a little stock, and a bit of butter.

Mix Gently for a Moist Meatloaf

For the best texture and flavor, use a light touch, a blend of meats, and shape the loaf by hand

BY JOE VERDE

There's no doubt that meatloaf is a comforting dish. And tinkering with someone's idea of the perfect comfort food can be tricky. I discovered this recently when I was asked to update a number of classic dishes—including pot roast, shepherd's pie, and, yes, meatloaf—as part of the renovation of Oscar's Restaurant in the Waldorf=Astoria Hotel in New York City. When I started working on the recipes, I realized that there's a fine line between refreshing a familiar dish and creating an entirely new one.

With meatloaf, I was concerned because the most familiar meatloaf tends to be dry, bland, and boring. I wanted a moist and tender meatloaf, but at the same time I also wanted a good balance of flavors. Meatloaf needs to be flavorful, but in a subtle way; no one wants or expects to be knocked back by a wallop of garlic or a kick of jalapeño.

Fortunately, a delicious, moist meatloaf that wouldn't betray too many good childhood memories wasn't hard to conceive. I started with equal amounts of ground beef, pork, and veal. A meatloaf made entirely from ground beef will definitely be heading in the dry and bland direction; I wanted the veal and pork for flavor and moisture. Next, I added judicious amounts of everyday ingredients: mustard, ketchup, parsley, Worcestershire sauce, salt, and pepper. For a mellower flavor, I first sautéed the onion and the little bit of garlic I wanted to add.

To bind the meatloaf, I decided to use fresh breadcrumbs and, of course, an egg. Many old cookbooks call for using a slice of white bread soaked in milk in place of breadcrumbs, but I found those meatloaves turn out very crumbly; I like the even slices I get from this breadcrumb-bound version.

Perhaps most important, I was careful to mix the ingredients gently until just combined; overmixing would compact the meat too much, giving it more of a terrine-like texture.

Along those lines, I decided to shape the loaf by hand and to cook it on a baking sheet (rather than pack it into a loaf pan). I prefer baking meatloaf this way because

a nice crunchy coating forms all the way around the loaf. Just before baking, I wrap strips of bacon around the loaf for extra flavor and moisture. This also produces some pretty tasty juices in the pan, which you can spoon over the meatloaf. You can skip the bacon if you like, but you'll miss out on some moisture and flavor.

In the end, I couldn't have been happier with the results: this meatloaf is tender, flavorful, and not at all boring. And according to our guests at Oscar's, it's definitely comforting.





Mix the ingredients until just combined. Your hands are the best tools for mixing thoroughly yet gently.



Shape the loaf directly on an oiled baking sheet. Pat the mixture into a broad oval; again, remember not to compact the meat too much.



Wrap the loaf with strips of bacon. You'll need to cut some of the bacon into shorter strips. Tuck the ends under the loaf.

RECIPE

Classic Meatloaf

If you don't see ground veal or ground pork at your grocer, ask the butcher to grind it for you. Choose ground beef that isn't too lean: 85 percent is a good bet. Many groceries carry "meatloaf" packages of ground beef, veal, and pork. Serves four to six.

1 Tbs. vegetable or olive oil; more for the baking sheet
½ cup finely chopped onion
1½ tsp. minced garlic
¾ lb. ground beef, 85-percent lean
¾ lb. ground veal
¾ lb. ground pork
½ cup tomato ketchup

1 Tbs. Dijon-style mustard
1½ tsp. Worcestershire sauce
¾ cup fresh plain breadcrumbs
1 egg
1½ tsp. salt
¾ tsp. freshly ground black pepper
¼ cup finely chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley
About 8 slices raw bacon

Heat the oven to 350°F. In a small skillet, heat the oil; add the onions and cook over medium heat until soft, about 4 min. Add the garlic and sauté another 1 to 2 min. to soften. Set aside to cool.

In a large mixing bowl, combine all the remaining ingredients except the bacon, and add the cooled onion-garlic mixture. Mix with a rubber spatula or your hands just until the ingredients are combined. Don't overwork the meat.

Oil a rimmed baking sheet or jelly roll pan, turn the meat mixture out onto the

pan, and shape it into a large loaf (I like mine to look like a slightly oval loaf of bread). Or divide the mixture into four equal portions (about 6 oz. each) and shape each portion into an individual meatloaf. Wrap strips of bacon around the shaped loaf, tucking the ends under the loaf.

Bake the meatloaf until an instant-read thermometer registers 160°F, 50 to 60 min. for a large loaf, or 25 to 35 min. for smaller loaves. Before slicing, let the meatloaf rest for 10 to 15 min. to allow some carryover cooking and to let the juices redistribute. To serve, slice and spoon some of the pan juices over the slices, if you like.

Joe Verde is the chef de cuisine at Oscar's Restaurant in the Waldorf-Astoria in New York City. ♦



Photo at left: Scott Phillips. All others: Sarah Jay.

Variations on a meatloaf

I think this recipe will please many people just as it is, but you could certainly make a few additions if you like. For a little extra color, sauté 1 cup diced red, green, and yellow bell peppers along with the onions and garlic; when cool, fold them into the rest of the mixture. The simple addition of ¼ cup shredded basil and ¼ cup grated Parmesan cheese will offer another level of flavor, or you could add a tablespoon of a favorite fresh herb, such as thyme or rosemary. At the restaurant, we shape the meatloaf into individual loaves, and you can do this at home too. Just divide the raw mixture into four (or more) parts and shape mini meatloaves. You can also double this recipe easily, but make only the quantity you want to bake: I don't recommend keeping the raw meatloaf mixture on hand once all the ingredients are combined.

Braising Winter's



For tenderness and flavor,
Susan Goss prefers braising.



Braised red cabbage gets its depth of flavor from red wine, its sweetness from brown sugar.

A brief sauté and then a relaxed,
gentle cooking on the stove melt
tough fibers into tender sweetness

BY SUSAN GOSS

When it comes to the rugged vegetables of winter, the only thing that turns me off more than overcooking is undercooking. So it was really disappointing when I decided to splurge on dinner at a prestigious restaurant a few years ago and got served *al dente* beets. I remember the details all too clearly.

My game-bird sausage appetizer arrived, studded with pistachios and garnished with baby beets. Since I'm a beet fan, I went straight for the garnish. But instead of yielding to the tines of my fork, that still-firm beet shot straight out, skidded across the table, and landed in my husband's lap. I was mortified, my husband was steamed, and that belligerent beet had left a magenta trail across the tablecloth. Oh, how I wished the chef had considered braising.

Photos: far left, Martha Holmberg; all others, except where noted, Sarah Jay

Vegetables



The point of the sauté is to brown the outside of the vegetables without cooking the inside.



Braising is a wonderful way to take advantage of some of the most underutilized vegetables of the season, such as celeriac, fennel, cabbage, leeks, turnips, and, yes, beets. All these vegetables are quite sturdy, packed with fibers, which makes them perfect candidates for the gentle, moist cooking of a braise.

Before the braise, a fast sauté

After a brief browning in a drop of fat, the vegetables are covered and cooked slowly in a small amount of liquid (usually stock or wine, or both). During the braise, the vegetables absorb most of the liquid, resulting in an irresistibly sweet and truly tender dish. What braised vegetables lack in appearance (the sad fact is that braising mutes their colors), they more than make up for in flavor and texture.

Proper braising requires the right pan. Choose a heavy-based, nonreactive pan that's shallow and wide enough to permit quick browning and even braising. It must have a tight-fitting lid so the liquid doesn't evaporate. A straight-sided 10-inch sauté pan is ideal for braising on the stovetop, and so is a stir-fry pan with a matching lid. A Dutch oven can also work, but I don't recommend using a deep saucepan—it's too narrow to sauté well in. Cooking times will vary depending on the pan, so you'll need to monitor progress accordingly. If you're using a larger pan, watch closely during the last few minutes of cooking—liquid disappears quickly on a large surface area, and the vegetables could stick or burn.

Cut the vegetables to uniform size. It's up to you to decide whether you want chunky cubes or a dainty

If liquid remains once the vegetables are tender, boil it down to a glaze, as the author did here for winter squash and red potatoes.

dice, but do stay consistent with your choice. For winter squash and root vegetables, I think larger pieces have better texture and are prettier on the plate, but a smaller chop will expose more surface area for better browning.

Braised vegetables begin with a very brief browning in a small amount of fat, which draws the vegetables' natural sugars to the surface. The vegetables should caramelize outside without cooking inside, so use high heat and sauté very quickly. A common mistake is to add the vegetables before the fat is hot enough. Oil is ready when it ripples, butter when it sizzles.

Keep the heat low. Once the liquid boils, cover the pan and lower the heat to medium or medium low. Braising time will range from 15 minutes to more than an hour, but you won't have to tend the vegetables during that time. They're done when a fork pierces them easily. Ideally, the liquid will be absorbed exactly when the vegetables are tender, but this doesn't always happen. If things look too dry, add a bit more stock. If there's excess liquid, remove the cover, turn the heat to high, and bring to a boil. While the liquid reduces to a glaze, stir gently to coat the vegetables and to keep them from sticking to the pan.

A fast sauté followed by a slow, covered simmer



Use high heat and lots of tossing to brown mushrooms.



Add aromatics and stock; cover and lower the heat.



Add aromatic seasonings to create a flavor base that complements the vegetables. Ground spices, sturdy herbs (like rosemary and thyme), garlic, and onions are good choices. I also use a generous grinding of fresh pepper. These seasonings are added before the braising liquid so the fat has a chance to absorb their flavors. For the liquid, vegetable and chicken stocks are my favorites. Wine adds a tangy dimension to braised vegetables; water works in a pinch. To use cream, use some stock at the beginning of cooking and add the cream toward the very end of the braise.

Stovetop braising for more control

Because vegetables braise relatively quickly (compared to meats) and because cooking times vary considerably depending on the pan size and the cut of the vegetables, I braise on the range rather than in the oven. The burner gives me better control over the heat, and it's easier to see how things are progressing.

RECIPES

Braised Leeks & Mushrooms with Bacon, Lemon & Thyme

Try this adaptable side dish alongside beef, chicken, or even a hearty seafood like monkfish. *Serves four.*

- ¾ cup chopped bacon (3 large slices)**
- 2 cups thinly sliced leeks, white and light green parts only (2 medium), rinsed well and dried**
- 4 cups (about 1 lb.) mixed mushrooms, such as white, cremini, shiitake, oyster, and portabella, large caps quartered, small caps left whole**
- ¼ tsp. coarse salt**
- 2 tsp. grated lemon zest**
- 1 Tbs. fresh thyme leaves**
- Freshly ground black pepper to taste**
- ¾ cup homemade or low-salt canned chicken or vegetable stock**

Put the bacon in a large skillet and set the skillet over medium heat. Cook until the bacon has begun to crisp and is half-cooked, about 8 min.

Add the leeks and increase the heat to medium high. Cook, stirring frequently, until the leeks are soft (the bacon will continue to crisp), about 6 min. Using a slotted spoon or skimmer, transfer the bacon and leeks to a bowl, leaving the fat in the pan.

Add the mushrooms to the pan and cook quickly, stirring occasionally, until the mushrooms are browned, about 6 min. Add the salt, lemon zest, thyme, and the leek and bacon mixture. Add pepper generously to taste (about 10 grinds) and stir.

Add the stock to the pan and bring to a boil, stirring to scrape the bottom of the pan. Cover the pan and reduce the heat to medium low. Braise slowly until the mushrooms are very tender and the liquid is ab-

onion and cook slowly over medium-low heat until the onion is golden brown (it's okay if the edges start to crisp), 15 to 20 min. Add the cabbage and sauté, tossing with tongs, until it has collapsed slightly and is no longer stiff, about 2 min.

Raise the heat to high and add the allspice, nutmeg, and salt. Add pepper generously to taste (about 20 grinds) and stir to coat the cabbage with the spices. Add the wine and bring to a boil. Cover the pan, reduce the heat to medium low, and cook until the cabbage is almost tender and the wine is absorbed, about 40 min. Raise the heat to medium and add the vinegar, stirring to deglaze the pan. Add the brown sugar, stir, and cover again, reducing the heat to medium low. Continue to braise until the liquid is absorbed and the cabbage is very tender, about 30 min. more. If the cabbage is done but there's still liquid in the pan, raise the heat to medium high and cook, uncovered, until the liquid has reduced to a glaze. Toss to coat and transfer to a serving dish.

Add wine, stock or even cream for a satisfyingly rich vegetable braise.



Serve braised leeks and mushrooms piping hot.

sorbed, about 20 min. If the mushrooms are tender but still brothy, raise the heat and boil, uncovered, until the broth has reduced considerably. Taste a mushroom and add more salt and pepper if needed.

Braised Red Cabbage with Red Zinfandel

This pleasantly sweet dish yearns to be served with roast pork and potatoes. *Serves four.*

2 Tbs. olive oil

½ large onion (1 like red), thinly sliced

1½ to 1¾ lb. red cabbage, thinly sliced (6 to 7 cups)

1 tsp. ground allspice

¼ tsp. ground nutmeg

¾ tsp. coarse salt

Freshly ground black pepper to taste

1 cup red Zinfandel or other good-quality red wine

½ cup red-wine vinegar

½ cup firmly packed dark brown sugar

In a large pan that's deep enough to accommodate the cabbage when raw, heat the olive oil. Add the

Braised Winter Squash & Potatoes with Mustard & Shallots

These braised squash and potatoes make a delicious side dish for roast chicken. Any kind of butternut or acorn squash is fine, but butternut has a smoother surface, which makes it easier to peel. *Serves four.*

2 Tbs. butter

1 lb. winter squash, peeled and cut into 1-inch chunks (about 1½ cups)

1 lb. small red potatoes, cut into 1-inch chunks

4 medium shallots, peeled and halved

2 tsp. minced fresh rosemary

1 tsp. coarse salt

Freshly ground black pepper to taste

1 Tbs. coarse-grained mustard, like Pommery

1 cup homemade or low-salt canned chicken stock

In a large skillet over medium-high heat, melt the butter, being careful not to let it burn. Swirl the pan to evenly coat with butter and add the squash, potatoes, and shallots. Toss and stir over medium-high heat until the vegetables have browned around the edges, 8 to 10 min.

Add the rosemary and salt. Add pepper generously to taste (about 10 grinds) and stir well. Add the mustard and stock, stirring to mix in the mustard. Bring the broth to a boil, cover the pan, and reduce the heat to medium low.

After the vegetables have been braising for 10 min., check the liquid: it should be almost all absorbed, and the vegetables should be completely tender. If the vegetables are tender but still brothy, raise the heat to high and boil the liquid, uncovered, until it's reduced to a syrupy glaze. Toss to coat the vegetables and transfer to a serving dish.

Susan Goss is the chef-owner of Zinfandel restaurant in Chicago. ♦

Mirepoix, Soffritto, Refogado, or Bumbu
...the First Step
to Great Flavor



You've probably noticed that most recipes for sauces, soups, and stews begin by asking you to cook one or more vegetables and occasionally a little meat in a small amount of fat. These basic mixtures go by different names in different cuisines, but they always play an important part in the character of a dish. A French *mirepoix*, an Italian *soffritto*, or a Portuguese *refogado* will each provide a foundation of flavor that will ultimately distinguish a dish from a similar one in another cuisine. It's helpful to know what goes into these basic mixtures and how and when to use them if you want to learn to improvise a sauce, soup, or stew without a recipe, or give a particular international twist to a simple dish, as we've done with the chicken recipes starting on p. 41.

**A versatile
base of
aromatic
herbs and
vegetables
builds flavor
in sauces,
soups, and
stews in every
cuisine**

BY JAMES PETERSON

Great flavor begins with simple ingredients. Here, it's a sauté of carrots, onions, celery, and ham—a classic combination the French call *mirepoix*.

Aromatic vegetables, herbs, and spices form classic flavor bases

In most European-influenced cuisines, classic flavor bases are made up of a mixture of three or four aromatic vegetables, sometimes herbs, and occasionally a small bit of meat. Asian cuisines often add freshly ground spices to their own combinations of aromatic vegetables and herbs.

Aromatic vegetables, which give off deep, well-rounded flavors and pleasing aromas when cooked, are the core of flavor bases. The classic French flavor base known as *mirepoix* (pronounced *meer-pwah*) is a combination of chopped onions, celery, and carrots made with twice as much onion as carrot and celery. The Italian *soffritto* (pronounced *soh-FREE-toh*) varies from region to region, and may be as simple as a chopped onion and a little garlic, or, like *mirepoix*, may be a mixture of vegetables that might include fennel. Italian cooks often like to use flavorful meats (especially pancetta or prosciutto) in the *soffritto* to give a hearty dish a deeper, richer flavor. A Catalan *sofregit* (*soh-frah-ZHEET*) starts with a slow sauté of onions in olive oil and is then enriched with tomatoes. A Spanish (or Castilian, to distinguish it from Catalan) *sofrito*, used to flavor classic rice dishes and rich braises, will usually include onions and garlic, and sometimes peppers, like its Portuguese equivalent, *refogado* (*rah-foh-GAH-doh*); tomatoes are often added.

Aromatic herbs and spices complete the flavor base. French cooks occasionally add a bay leaf or a little fresh thyme to their *mirepoix*. And it's not unusual to find a leaf or two of sage or a few sprigs of parsley in an Italian *soffritto*.

When you move on to the Eastern cuisines, you'll notice that cooks from non-European traditions work with a wider and more varied palette of aromatic vegetables and spices. A typical Indian base mixture for a curry may contain onion and garlic, hot chiles, and chopped ginger. And just before liquid is added, sophisticated hand-blended curry powders are added and quickly sautéed to release their fragrance. Indonesian cooks have an especially exotic base mixture—called *bumbu*—that includes shrimp paste, powdered galangal (an aromatic rhizome similar to ginger), and *kemiri* (or candlenut), an oily nut that gives a particularly unctuous texture to Indonesian stews. Thai cooks make one of several types of curry pastes for their flavor bases. The pastes are made by grinding together aromatics like shallots, lemongrass, chiles, and kaffir lime leaves.

How a flavor base is cooked will vary by region

A flavor base is usually added to a dish at the very beginning of cooking. Typically, it is cooked in fat



You don't always need a fat. Charring vegetables in a dry skillet is the first step in a Mexican tomato sauce.

until the flavors are released, but subtle differences in cooking methods can change how a flavor base affects a dish. Usually, especially in European cooking, flavorful base mixtures are gently “sweated” before liquids are added. The distinction between sweating and sautéing is an important one, because sautéing, with its emphasis on high heat and rapid cooking, is designed to seal the flavor of the vegetables *within* the vegetables, while sweating, which is cooking over low heat, is designed to get the vegetables to release their flavor so that it ultimately ends up in the surrounding liquid. Traditional directions for sweating vegetables call for covering the pan so the moisture and aroma from the vegetables is entrapped and the vegetables don’t have a chance to brown. But for some dishes, it’s useful to first cook the vegetables gently, covered, and then remove the lid and allow the vegetables to slowly caramelize before adding liquid. This caramelization gives soups and sauces a richer and more complex flavor and a deeper color.

The type of fat used to cook the base mixture will also influence the final flavor and sometimes even the texture of a dish. The French generally



James Peterson browns chicken pieces first and then makes the sauce in the same skillet, maximizing flavor as well as efficiency.

What size pieces should I cut?



Fine dice for a quick-cooking sauce.



A medium cut for soups and braises.



Chunks for long-cooking stews.

The size you cut the individual components of a flavor mixture depends on how long the mixture will cook and if it will be puréed. The French make a big deal out of demanding that a classic *mirepoix* be cut into very tiny dice (called *brunoise*)—a handy way of torturing beginning

culinary students. But there’s actually a sound reason for chopping *mirepoix* into small pieces for a quick-cooking dish: the smaller pieces will release their flavor more quickly during the short cooking time. On the other hand, *mirepoix* for a pot of long-simmering stock can consist

of very large pieces of vegetables—onions cut in half, whole celery ribs, and carrots in chunks.

For the same reason, other cuisines call for mincing aromatics like ginger and lemongrass that are too fibrous to eat in large bites; but for a long-simmering dish,

those aromatics might be left whole and slightly crushed, and then removed after cooking. Size also affects the look of a dish; if you’re making a light sauce and you don’t intend to purée it, you’ll want to cut your aromatics in small, neat pieces for an attractive final presentation.

cook *mirepoix* in butter, but country cooks may improvise according to their own traditions. A Provençal cook, for example, will probably use olive oil (and add garlic to the ingredients), a cook in Gascony might cook the vegetables in duck or goose fat, and an Alsatian cook may use lard. Asian cooks might use coconut or peanut oil, and Indians are known for their flavorful *ghee* (toasted clarified butter). While Italians also use whatever fat is most abundant in their region (butter, olive oil, lard, or even the rendered fat from a prosciutto or pancetta rind), Mexican cooks often don't use any fat at all. Instead they dry-roast garlic, onions, and chiles on a *comal*, a kind of flat, heavy roasting pan. The *comal* gives the vegetables a distinctive and delicious toasted flavor.

Once the flavor foundations in a dish have been laid down, the cook can build the kind of dish she wants—a stew, a soup, a sauce, or a braise. Adding liquids like coconut milk or chicken stock can enhance the dish's flavors one step further, and the final dish will have the distinctive character of a particular cuisine.

RECIPES

Change the flavor base, change the chicken

The three recipes that follow each use a flavor base to make a unique sauce. The chicken is sautéed first, and then it finishes cooking in the sauce. We've used the same technique for cooking the chicken in all three recipes to illustrate how much a change in a flavor base can affect a final dish. The Chicken in White Wine Sauce starts with a classic French *mirepoix*, the Indian chicken uses chiles, curry, and ginger, and the Mexican chicken starts with a sauce made from vegetables that are charred in a cast-iron pan with no fat. Use any one of these recipes as a starting point to try other flavor bases. A look at the chart on p. 43 will give you an idea of the range of choices in flavors available from cuisines all over the world.

Classic French Chicken in White Wine Sauce

This is a variation on a chicken fricassée, using a classic French *mirepoix* to flavor the sauce. The addition of a little prosciutto or ham to the *mirepoix* gives the finished sauce a nice depth. If the ham you choose is particularly salty, season the chicken only very lightly with salt. Serve the chicken in wide soup bowls with egg noodles or rice, if you like, and the sauce spooned over all. Serves four.



2 Tbs. butter
4-lb. chicken, cut into 6 pieces (or 3½ to 4 lb. chicken pieces)
Salt and freshly ground black pepper
1 medium onion, finely chopped
1 medium carrot, finely chopped
½ rib celery, finely chopped
2 oz. prosciutto or country ham, finely chopped
¾ cup dry white wine
¾ cup homemade or low-salt canned chicken stock
3 Tbs. heavy cream (at room temperature)
Chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley

Melt the butter in a large skillet over medium heat. Season the chicken with salt and pepper and cook it in the skillet on the skin side to brown it and to render the fat from the skin, about 15 min. Turn the chicken over and cook on the bone side for about 5 min. Remove and reserve the chicken. Pour off all but 2 Tbs. of the fat from the pan. Add the onion, carrot, celery, and prosciutto or ham and sauté until the onion is browned and the vegetables are softened, 8 to 10 min. Add the wine and chicken stock to the pan and stir to combine with vegetables. Put the chicken back into the pan. Bring the liquid to a boil, reduce to a simmer, cover the skillet with a lid, and simmer the chicken in the sauce until cooked through, 20 to 25 min. Remove the chicken from the pan, turn the heat to high and bring the liquid to a boil. Reduce the volume of liquid by half, about 5 min. (or 6 to 7 min. if you want a thicker sauce). Add the cream, stir to combine, and remove the pan from the heat. Transfer the chicken to wide soup plates; taste and season the sauce with salt and pepper if necessary and spoon it over the chicken. Sprinkle with the chopped parsley.

(Turn the page for more recipes)

A touch of cream and a smoky hint of ham bring together a flavorful white wine sauce for a chicken fricassée with a French feel.



A smooth curry sauce makes an Indian-inspired chicken. Start with onions, garlic, ginger, and chiles and end with a little coconut milk.

Indian Chicken with Coconut Milk

If you don't have *ghee* or clarified butter, try sautéing the chicken in a combination of butter and vegetable oil. Serve this chicken with rice and garnish with chopped cashews and cilantro. *Serves four.*

- 4-lb. chicken, cut into 6 pieces (or 3½ to 4 lb. chicken pieces)**
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper**
- 2 Tbs. *ghee*, clarified butter, or butter and oil**
- 1 medium onion, thinly sliced**
- 2 cloves garlic, chopped**
- 1 or 2 serrano chiles or 3 small jalapeños, cored, seeded, and finely chopped**
- 1 Tbs. finely chopped fresh ginger**
- 1½ Tbs. curry powder**
- ¾ cup homemade or low-salt canned chicken stock**
- 1 cup coconut milk (canned is fine)**
- ½ cup roasted cashew halves**
- 3 Tbs. coarsely chopped cilantro leaves**

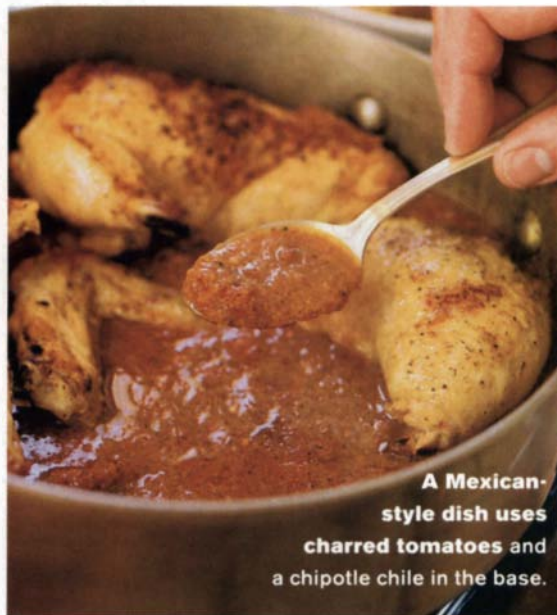
Season the chicken with salt and pepper and cook it in the *ghee* in a large skillet over medium heat on the skin side to brown it and to render the fat from the skin, about 15 min. Turn the chicken over and cook on the bone side for about 5 min. Remove the chicken from the pan and reserve.

Pour all but 2 Tbs. of the fat out of the pan and stir in the onion, garlic, chiles, and ginger. Cook over medium heat while stirring frequently until the onion lightly caramelizes, about 15 min. Add the curry powder and sauté until fragrant, about 2 min.

Add the chicken stock to the pan, scraping up any browned bits, and return the chicken pieces to the pan. Bring to a boil, reduce the heat, and simmer, covered, until the chicken is firm to the touch and cooked through, 20 to 25 min. Add the coconut milk, simmer until thickened (3 to 5 min.), and remove from the heat. Transfer the chicken to shallow serving bowls, spoon the sauce over, and sprinkle with the chopped cashews and cilantro.

Chicken with Mexican Charred Tomato Sauce

You'll want to use two skillets for this recipe, as the skillet used to char the vegetables will need a good cleaning (and reseasoning, if cast iron) before it's used again. Chipotle chiles add a nice smoky heat to the sauce; if you can't find them, substitute a few dashes of your favorite hot sauce or chile paste. Serve this piquant chicken with lime wedges, chopped cilantro and chiles, and sour cream. *Serves four.*



- 3 cloves garlic**
- 1 small onion, quartered**
- 3 to 4 large tomatoes (18 to 20 oz. total)**
- 2 Tbs. butter or olive oil**
- 4-lb. chicken, cut into 6 pieces (or 3½ to 4 lb. chicken pieces)**
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper**
- 1 tsp. finely chopped canned chipotle chile (about 1 small)**
- Leaves from ½ bunch cilantro (about 1 cup lightly packed), coarsely chopped**
- 2 jalapeños, cored, seeded, and finely chopped**
- Lime wedges**
- ½ cup sour cream**

Heat a large cast-iron skillet, without any oil, on high heat. When the pan is very hot (about 3 to 4 min.; a drop of water will sizzle away instantly), put in the garlic, onion, and tomatoes. Stirring every few minutes, cook the onion and garlic until they brown on all sides and become fragrant, about 10 min. (The garlic may be removed earlier.) Move the tomatoes around with tongs until they blacken and most of the skin is blistered. Remove and reserve the vegetables.

Reduce the heat to medium and add the butter or oil to a new skillet that's just large enough to hold the chicken. Season the chicken with salt and pepper and cook in the skillet on the skin side to brown it and to render the fat from the skin, about 15 min. Turn the chicken over and cook on the bone side for about 5 min. Remove and reserve the chicken. Drain the fat from the pan.

Aromatic flavors from around the world

Every cuisine has a palette of distinctive flavors; work them into your basic recipes for a new twist of flavor.

country	name of flavor base	cooking fat	typical vegetables and aromatics	meats	herbs, spices, and other flavorings
France (classic)	<i>mirepoix</i>	butter	onions, carrots, celery	20th century—none; 19th century—ham and veal	sometimes thyme and bay leaf
France (Gascony)	<i>mirepoix</i>	duck or goose fat, pork fat	onions, carrots, celery	confit of duck or goose, Bayonne ham	thyme, bay leaf
France (Provence)	<i>mirepoix</i>	olive oil	onions, leeks, fennel, garlic, tomatoes	usually none	thyme, bay leaf, orange zest, saffron
India		<i>ghee</i> (toasted clarified butter), vegetable oil, mustard oil, coconut oil	onions, garlic, chiles, ginger	none	ginger, cardamom, cumin, cloves, asafetida, cinnamon, fenugreek, curry leaves, curry mix, masala
Indonesia	<i>bumbu</i>	coconut oil	onions, garlic, chiles	none	shrimp paste, ginger, <i>kemiri</i> (candlenuts), galangal, <i>salam</i> leaves
Italy	<i>soffritto</i>	olive oil, butter, rendered prosciutto or pancetta fat	onions, garlic, fennel	prosciutto, pancetta, veal	parsley, bay leaf, sage
Mexico		none (vegetables roasted on a <i>coma</i>), vegetable oil	fresh and dried chiles, onions, garlic, tomatoes	none	dried chile powders, cinnamon, aniseed, sesame seeds, almonds, pumpkin seeds, thyme, <i>epazote</i> , oregano
Morocco		<i>smen</i> (clarified and caramelized butter), vegetable oil	onions, scallions, garlic, raisins, tomatoes	none	ginger, saffron, turmeric, cinnamon
Portugal	<i>refogado</i>	lard, olive oil	onions, garlic, tomatoes, sweet peppers, hot chiles, pimento	bacon, pork	saffron, oregano, paprika
Puerto Rico	<i>sofrito</i>	lard, olive oil	onions, garlic, cherry peppers	smoked ham, chorizo, sausage, bacon	cilantro, ginger, annatto, cumin, saffron
Spain (Castilian)	<i>sofrito</i>	olive oil, lard, rendered ham fat	onions, garlic	ham, bacon	dried chiles, parsley, bay leaves, saffron, paprika
Spain (Catalan)	<i>sofregit</i>	olive oil	onions, tomatoes	sometimes cured ham, usually none	parsley, thyme, saffron
Thailand	curry pastes	vegetable oil or coconut oil	shallots, garlic, chiles	none	galangal, kaffir lime leaves, lemongrass

Pull the skin off the tomatoes, remove the cores and stem, and cut the tomatoes in half crosswise; gently squeeze out their seeds. Put the garlic, onion, tomatoes, and chipotle chile in a blender and purée to a smooth sauce, about 2 min. (You should have about 1 ¼ cups sauce.) Pour the sauce back into a large skillet (it will just cover the bottom), and then add the chicken pieces back to the pan as well. Simmer the chicken gently in the sauce, covered, until cooked through, 25 to 30 min. Transfer the chicken to wide

soup plates. Season the sauce with salt and spoon it over the chicken. Pass the cilantro, jalapeños, lime wedges, and sour cream in separate little bowls at the table for guests to sprinkle over the chicken.

James Peterson, a contributing editor to Fine Cooking, is the award-winning author of Sauces (John Wiley & Sons), Fish & Shellfish (William Morrow), Splendid Soups (Bantam), and Vegetables (William Morrow). ♦

Classic Chocolate Truffles

For the softest, silkiest centers, stir the chocolate and cream into an emulsion



Whether plain or rolled in cocoa, these unforgettable truffles boast velvety soft ganache centers, thanks to a simple stirring technique.

Chop the chocolate for



Bill Yosses likes to get all the chocolate chopped at the start. Use a serrated knife or the heel of a chef's knife and have a small stainless-steel bowl handy.

BY BILL YOSSES

In 1985, I began an apprenticeship at La Maison du Chocolat in Paris. A few days into it, Robert Linxe, my mentor and La Maison's owner, offered me a small, round chocolate truffle. I bit into it. The brittle shell split open with a satisfying crack, revealing a melty, smooth ganache filling. A wave of deep bittersweet chocolate washed over me, and in its wake came a gentle ripple of fresh mint. Yes, I thought, that's a Mint Chocolate Truffle all right—capital M, capital C, capital T.

Truffles are, or should be, like that—the essence of chocolate, concentrated in one bite. Like an intense but fleeting romance, the memory of a terrific truffle can linger for years. At least it did for me. Although I learned to make a lot of other chocolate confections during my apprenticeship, I never fell as hard as I did for that first truffle.

Photos: Ben Fink

the ganache and for dipping



Chop the chocolate for the ganache by shaving shards from the bar and then cross-cutting to get chips no bigger than peanuts. Transfer to the bowl. Chop the dipping chocolate the same way and set aside.



For tempered truffles, separate out one-quarter (8 ounces or about 1½ cups) of the chopped dipping chocolate and, using a chef's knife, chop it into even finer pieces. Set these pieces aside in a bowl separate from the rest of the pile.

Make the ganache



Heat the cream in a small saucepan until it just comes to a boil and pour it over the chopped chocolate for the ganache.



Using a wooden spoon, stir quickly in small circles in the center of the bowl. The chocolate center will become a viscous, shiny emulsion.

The best part is that I've learned to recreate that sublime chocolate experience time and again, and so can you. Truffles are made in two steps: first you make the chocolate ganache centers, and then you dip those centers into melted, tempered chocolate. Of course, you can add other flavors, as Robert Linxe did with that fateful mint truffle I tasted in Paris, but when I'm in my most chocolate mood, nothing beats a classic chocolate truffle.

If the thought of tempering chocolate keeps you up at night, you won't lose sleep over these truffles. Tempered chocolate will give the truffles a wonderful shine and snap, but tempering isn't mandatory. If you don't mind storing them in the fridge, you can still make impressive truffles at home without tempering.

What sets these truffles apart from others are their velvety soft interiors, which I achieve by using a higher than usual proportion of cream to chocolate for the ganache. Because

the ganache is so delicate, it needs a little extra care. But I never have a problem as long as I handle the ganache like the emulsion that it is, right from the start.

Working with chocolate can feel precarious at times, but it doesn't have to be that way. By using my emulsion technique, by remembering a few rules about melted chocolate, and by following these step-by-step photos, you'll soon find yourself turning out truffles like a pro.

Start with top-quality chocolate and a dry work surface

To make a sensational chocolate truffle, you have to start with sensational chocolate. How can you tell the difference? My favorite way is to just taste it, but if

that's not possible, check the label for the percentage of cocoa solids. More cocoa solids usually translates into more intense chocolate flavor and less sweetness.

I use chocolate with at least 60 percent cocoa solids, but good truffles can be made with 55 percent. Lindt "Excellence" and Valrhona are safe bets, not only for their flavor, but also because they seem to be more fluid—and therefore easier to work with—when melted. (See Sources, p. 76.)

Chocolate doesn't like small amounts of liquid, although it does fine with larger amounts (anything over 25 percent of the weight of the chocolate is fine). A few drops of water that accidentally splash into a bowl of melted chocolate can cause the chocolate to clump up, or seize, and become unworkable. To avoid this, start with a super-dry work surface, be fastidious about using dry utensils, and have a towel handy.

It doesn't matter what tool you use to chop the chocolate, as long as you get small enough pieces. I've seen plenty of apprentices break off the tips of good chef's knives while trying to chop a block of chocolate. Don't follow their example—use the heel of the knife. The

Want to see this in action?

Check out our video on making truffles on *Fine Cooking's* web site. <http://finecooking.com>



Gradually stir in larger circles, bringing in more chocolate from the sides. Keep enlarging the shiny center until all the chocolate has been incorporated. If the emulsion cools before all the chocolate has melted, briefly flash the bowl over a pan of hot (not simmering) water for a few seconds, being careful not to overheat the ganache and lose the emulsion. When there are no more lumps, continue stirring for one more minute; don't overmix. Set the ganache aside to cool.



Meanwhile, in another bowl, beat the butter with a wooden spoon until it's very soft, smooth, and creamy.

chore of chopping (and I won't lie: it is a chore) is a bit more speedy using a serrated knife—preferably not your best one, since the chopping is bad for the knife.

At Bouley Bakery in New York, we use an ice pick to break up blocks of chocolate. If you use a food processor, first chop the chocolate into chestnut-size pieces and then process with pulses, taking care that the chocolate doesn't start to melt. Whatever method you use, chop until you get peanut-size pieces. Small, fairly uniform pieces ensure that the chocolate will melt quickly and evenly.

Energetic mixing builds an emulsion

The key to this soft, smooth ganache is to create an emulsion, which simply means that the droplets of fat from the chocolate and cream are evenly dispersed in liquid.



When the ganache has cooled to room temperature and thickened noticeably, add the butter, in small pieces a few at a time. The butter should blend without melting. Stir until no butter bits remain. Gradually pour in the liqueur, stirring constantly to maintain the smooth emulsion.

The technique I use is an energetic, controlled mixing. I've recently switched utensils, from a whisk to a wooden spoon, for an even denser, creamier ganache. A small stainless-steel bowl is ideal—a small bowl helps support the emulsion, and stainless steel is a good heat conductor.

Begin stirring in a very tight circle in the center of the bowl. A thick, dark pool of melted chocolate will form in the center, surrounded by a ragged moat of cream. Keep stirring only in the center until the small pool of chocolate turns shiny and viscous. At that point, the emulsion is established, and you can gradually widen the circle, pulling in more cream a bit at a time.

As soon as all the cream has been incorporated, stop stirring. This ganache doesn't benefit from extra air, and excessive agitation can actually break the emulsion. For those reasons, I don't recommend using a food processor. If the emulsion does break, you can salvage it by transferring one-third of the ganache to a separate bowl and whisking it vigorously while adding a few tablespoons of very hot

Shape the truffles



If you want to pipe the truffles immediately, chill the ganache in the refrigerator until it's cool but not firm, 10 to 15 minutes. Otherwise, cover the bowl with plastic wrap and let it sit at room temperature until ready, up to one day. When you're ready to pipe, the ganache should be as smooth and as soft as peanut butter (but not as sticky).

cream. Once the emulsion returns, gradually ladle in the rest of the broken ganache, whisking all the while.

Once the ganache is made, be gentle with it. Temperature extremes can wreck an emulsion. When the ganache has cooled to room temperature, ease in the butter, also at room temperature. You need to mash the butter first into a soft, smooth paste, called a *pommade*, by beating it with a wooden spoon. Stir in the liqueur a bit at a time (the small amount of liquid won't make the chocolate seize since it has already been mixed with the liquid cream).

I use a pastry bag to pipe the ganache into truffle centers. If you don't have one, use a strong freezer bag and snip one corner to get a 1/2-inch opening. To pipe, use your dominant hand to press on the bag while the other hand guides the tip. Aim for spheres, but it's all right if you get irregular blobs; it just means a little more time shaping. After briefly chilling the centers in the fridge, you'll roll the centers between your palms to round out the shape. You can store the piped and shaped



Fill a pastry bag, fitted with a ½-inch tip, one-third of the way with the ganache. Holding the bag vertical, pipe the ganache onto parchment-lined baking sheets, aiming for 1-inch drops. Refrigerate the truffle centers until quite firm, about 1 hour.



Shape each truffle center into a smooth ball by rolling it between your palms. Your palms will be covered in chocolate after rolling a few truffles. If you sense that the truffles are melting too much as you roll, dip your hands in ice water, dry them well, and then continue rolling. (To smooth the truffles even more, refrigerate them for 30 minutes and then roll them a second time.) Refrigerate the shaped truffles on the baking sheet for 1 hour, or until ready to dip.

ganache centers, covered in plastic, for up to a week in the refrigerator.

Melt the chocolate; hold your temper

The first task before dipping is to organize your workspace. Set up an assembly line that includes the baking sheet of shaped centers, the bowl of melted or tempered chocolate (I'll cover that in a moment), another parchment-lined sheet for the just-dipped truffles, and, if you're rolling the truffles in cocoa, a shallow dish of cocoa powder.

There are lots of ways to melt chocolate. Most pastry chefs these days use a microwave. I don't. A microwave is fine if you've learned (often by trial and error) how high to go and for how long, but otherwise, it's too easy to burn the chocolate. I use the time-honored double-boiler method, which is safer and almost as fast as the microwave.

Use a medium-size shallow bowl over a small saucepan. The bowl must be big enough to rest firmly on the saucepan so that no steam escapes, but it should also

be small enough to maintain a well of chocolate for dipping. The water in the bottom saucepan should be hot but not simmering, so remember to take the pan off the heat before you set the bowl of chocolate on top. Also remember that steam is no friend of chocolate. Every time you lift the bowl off the saucepan, wipe the bottom dry.

Decide if you want to temper. Tempered chocolate has a professional-looking sheen, snaps cleanly, and is less likely to wilt at room temperature (because it has a higher melting point). If those are important qualities for your truffles, you'll want to temper the chocolate you use for dipping. All you'll need are an accurate chocolate thermometer (see Sources, p. 76) and a calm disposition.

Store-bought chocolate has been tempered during manufacturing. When you melt it, as you must do to dip the truffles, the chocolate loses its temper. To regain its temper, the chocolate must be heated,

Prepare your work area



Set two parchment-lined baking sheets on a long work surface, leaving enough space to one side for the melted chocolate and the truffle centers, in that order. Set out two or three forks and knives. If you're rolling the truffles in cocoa powder, sift it into a shallow dish and set it to one side of the work area.

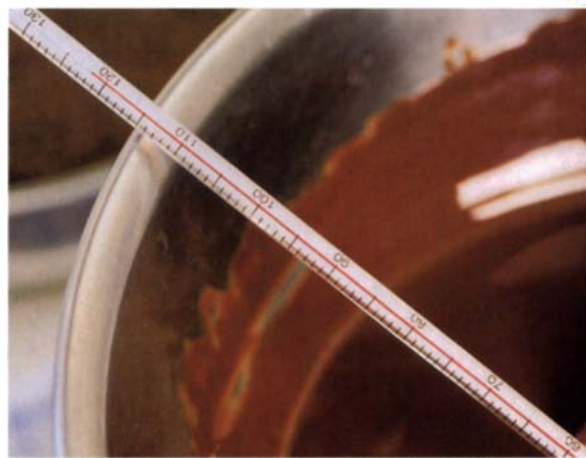
In a medium saucepan, simmer about an inch of water. Transfer the 2 pounds (or 1½ pounds, if tempering) of reserved chopped chocolate to a stainless-steel or Pyrex bowl that's large enough

to rest over—not in—the water.

Melt the chocolate



Remove the pan of water from the heat and set the chopped chocolate over it. Stir with a wooden spoon until the chocolate is completely melted. If you're not tempering, set the bowl (dry the bottom) on the work surface and skip directly to the dipping photos on p. 49.



If you're tempering the chocolate, continue heating it over the pan of hot water (heat it again if necessary) until a chocolate thermometer registers between 120° and 125°F; proceed to the next series.

Temper the chocolate



Remove the bowl from the saucepan, dry the bottom, and cool the chocolate to 86°F by adding the reserved chopped chocolate, 2 tablespoons at a time, stirring after each addition until the pieces melt.



When the temperature reaches 86°F and the pieces no longer melt (you might not use them up), very gently raise the temperature to between 88° and 91°F by flashing the bowl over the pan of hot water for 10 seconds at a time, drying the bottom of the bowl every time.



To test if the chocolate is in temper, spread a bit on a swatch of parchment and let cool for a few minutes. The chocolate is in temper if it sets quickly. If the chocolate has white streaks and is tacky to the touch, it is not in temper; start the tempering process again by heating the chocolate to 120°F (or just continue, knowing that the truffles may not be tempered).



Keep the chocolate in temper by holding it between 88° and 91°F. To monitor the temperature, tape the thermometer to the bowl (the bulb shouldn't touch the bowl). If the temperature in the center of the bowl drops to 89°F, flash the bowl over the hot water in 10-second increments until the temperature hits 90°F. Set the tempered melted chocolate on the work surface.

cooled, and then very gently warmed as described below. (For an explanation of the chemistry behind tempering, see *Food Science*, p. 74.) Tempering chocolate is an intuitive science. Because I do it every day, I know when the chocolate is in temper by sight and by touch. But beginners will need to monitor the thermometer closely, first to get the chocolate in temper, and then to maintain it.

The tempering process is as follows:

♦ **Melt the chocolate to between 120° and 125°F.** Do this over a pan of hot water, stirring the chocolate with a rubber spatula or a wooden spoon.

♦ **Cool the melted chocolate to 86°F.** There are several ways to do this, but one of the simplest is to add very finely chopped pieces of tempered chocolate to the melted chocolate and stir them around. This process, known as seeding, floods the melted chocolate with tempered cocoa-butter crystals, which encourage more of those same crystals to form.

It's important that you use store-bought chocolate (which has already been tempered) for this step. Stop adding chocolate when the shavings are no longer melting and the temperature has dropped to 86°F or slightly lower.

♦ **Warm the chocolate—very carefully—to between 88° and 91°F.** To raise the temperature only a few degrees, you will “flash” the bowl over the pan of hot water for ten seconds, wipe the bottom of

the bowl dry, check the temperature, and flash again as necessary.

♦ **Maintain the chocolate between 88° and 91°F.** In this range, the chocolate is in temper and ready for dipping. Outside of this range, it's at risk of losing its temper. Don't worry about the chocolate that hardens on the sides of the bowl during dipping. It's more important to maintain the pool of tempered chocolate in the center.

You'll probably have leftover chocolate after dipping. Save it for the next batch of ganache, or for eating. After dipping, the chocolate will contain trace amounts of cream, which means it's not fit for another tempering session.

Try another truffle

After getting the hang of classic chocolate truffles, you can experiment with other flavors. You can modify the ganache by using another liqueur, adding a fruit purée, or steeping herbs in the cream.

♦ To add fruit to the ganache, purée fresh ripe fruit and strain out any fibers or seeds. Try raspberries, mangos, apricots, passionfruit, sour cherries, or any fruit with

strong flavors and not too much acidity.

♦ To use herbs, steep them in the hot cream for 20 minutes; strain them out. Remeasure the cream (the herbs will have absorbed some of the liquid), correct the measurement with more cream, and add it to the chopped chocolate. Try fresh mint, basil, licorice-flavored hisop, or dried teas like Earl Grey and jasmine.

Dip, tap, and roll

Whether your melted chocolate is tempered or not, the final step—the dipping—is the most thrilling. But unless you want to end up like Lucille Ball in the famous runaway chocolate candies episode of *I Love*

Dip the truffles



Remove about one-quarter of the truffle centers from the fridge; set them on the work surface. Immerse one in the chocolate and spin it around with a fork to cover completely. Lift it out on the tines.



Tap the fork on the sides of the bowl several times so the excess chocolate drips off and a thin chocolate shell forms around the truffle. You may have to tap 20 times or more. If the untempered chocolate thickens too much, or if the tempered chocolate falls to 89°F, flash the chocolate over hot water in 10-second increments to warm it.



Gently set the dipped truffles on the lined baking sheets, using a knife to nudge the truffle off the fork without scraping off any coating. When the utensils are sticky with chocolate, switch to clean ones to avoid scarring the shell. Continue with all the truffle centers.

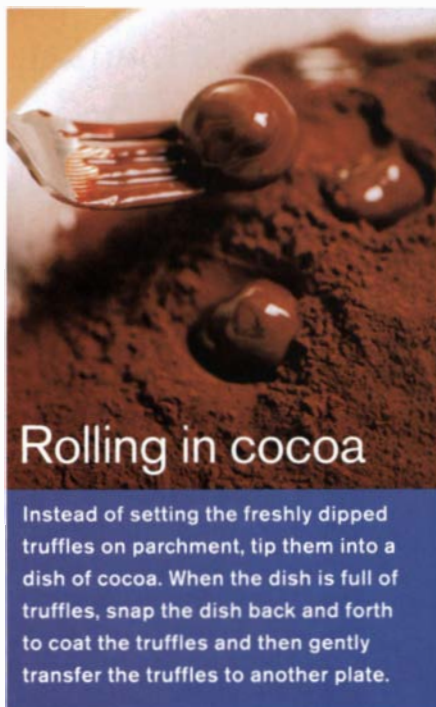
Lucy, it's critical that you stay organized and work quickly.

Your assembly line should be set up by the time the chocolate is ready for dipping. You'll need a fork to dip. Choose one with thin tines so the melted chocolate drips off more easily. Professional truffle forks have very thin, very light tines; you can simulate that effect by bending back two tines of an old cafeteria fork or by breaking off the middle tines of a plastic fork.

For untempered truffles, it's a good idea to roll the dipped truffle in cocoa powder. You could also try ground nuts, coconut, or confectioners' sugar. Besides adding another texture, the coating masks the untempered truffle's duller finish. I like to leave tempered truffles unrolled to flaunt their glossy, smooth shells.

If "feet" have formed on the truffle, it means you haven't tapped off enough of the excess chocolate. Just snap off the feet when the chocolate has set.

Tempered truffles will keep for three days at room temperature. Store them in a cool, dry place, preferably with low humidity. In the refrigerator, they'll last



Instead of setting the freshly dipped truffles on parchment, tip them into a dish of cocoa. When the dish is full of truffles, snap the dish back and forth to coat the truffles and then gently transfer the truffles to another plate.

for about a week or in the freezer for up to a month (their centers will firm up somewhat). Untempered truffles must be stored in the refrigerator or freezer. Store all refrigerated and frozen truffles in air-

tight containers to prevent condensation. Remove them an hour or two before serving, keeping them covered until they reach room temperature.

RECIPE

Classic Chocolate Truffles

Yields about 80 one-inch truffles.

FOR THE GANACHE FILLING:

12 oz. good-quality bittersweet chocolate
1 cup heavy cream
4 oz. (8 Tbs.) unsalted butter, at room temperature
¼ cup good-quality liqueur (rum, Cognac, Armagnac, Grand Marnier)

FOR DIPPING:

2 lb. good-quality bittersweet chocolate
8 oz. Dutch-processed cocoa powder (optional)

For the procedure, review the text and then follow the photos and captions starting on p. 44.

Bill Yosses is the pastry chef at Bouley Bakery in New York City. ♦





What to Look for in an Ice-Cream Machine

If you want to control freezing temperature, an old-fashioned bucket freezer is the way to go.

For complete control, choose a manual; if convenience matters most, go electric

BY SARAH JAY

I got my first ice-cream machine in the middle of winter, and by the time spring had arrived, I'd cranked out more ice cream than I (and my ever-growing circle of ice-cream-loving friends) had ever consumed in a single summer. It's not something I'm terribly proud of, and I only mention it now to make a small point, which is that making ice cream at home can and should be a year-round activity. If you're considering buying a machine for yourself or someone you know, winter is as good a season as any.

You'll find a wide range of ice-cream machines on the market. I've limited this review to the three most popular and available styles: the old-fashioned can and bucket models that require crushed ice and rock salt; the ultramodern countertop units that rely on compression (just like your refrigerator); and the

cylindrical canisters with a sealed-in antifreeze coolant that must be frozen before use.

Regardless of the technology, all ice-cream machines operate on the same principle. They introduce air into a liquid custard mixture using a paddle, called a dasher, while simultaneously freezing it. In some models, the dasher itself spins, and in others, the canister revolves around a stationary dasher. Either way, the dasher does the same thing: it scrapes the frozen mixture from the sides of the canister and pushes it toward the center, allowing new ice crystals to form along the sides. As more of the custard freezes, the dasher also starts to beat in air. The whole process usually takes 20 to 30 minutes.

The two big factors that determine the quality of the ice cream are the speed of the dasher and the temperature of the coolant. Dasher speed de-



The dasher is sometimes more than just a simple scraper. The White Mountain dasher, for example, has an inner beater that spins in the opposite direction of the outer wooden scraper, a design that helps ensure even, efficient freezing.



Proper serving technique lengthens freezer life. Grazing across the surface, rather than scooping out deep pits, preserves ice cream texture by minimizing the formation of ice crystals.

termines how much air gets incorporated into the custard. A dasher that turns slowly will trap less air, yielding a dense ice cream reminiscent of gelato. “If your objective is to make an ice cream that will exceed Häagen-Dazs or Ben & Jerry’s in quality, then you want a machine that doesn’t go really fast,” says Andrew Hingston, an ice-cream entrepreneur in California who was graduated from the same ice-cream school that gave Ben and Jerry their start.

A faster dasher introduces more air, and the result is a lighter ice cream. At the same time, a faster dasher scrapes ice crystals from the sides of the can more quickly, which keeps those crystals nice and tiny. The smaller the crystals, the smoother the ice cream.

The temperature of the coolant—salt and ice, antifreeze, or a compression freezer—determines

how fast the custard freezes, which in turn affects the ice cream’s texture. A rapid freeze will give you smaller ice crystals and smoother texture—up to a point; too quick a freeze (faster than 20 minutes) will likely give the opposite result. A lethargic freeze means the ice cream must be mixed for a longer time, which risks an airy, almost fluffy dessert, or worse: if your custard mixture has a high butterfat content, you might even end up with bits of butter in the ice cream.

Bucket freezers put you in control; newer models are more hands-off

For more than 100 years, the most popular home ice-cream machines were the bucket freezers that use salt and ice. You can find these classics at garage sales for less than \$10 (make sure the metal parts



A hole in the lid makes things simple. A feature of electric cylinder freezers, the hole lets you easily pour in the custard and add chips or cookies later.



Crank fast or slow with manual cylinder freezers, like the Donvier above.

If your ice cream is less than perfect...

If you own an ice-cream machine but are unsatisfied with the results, don't assume it's a clunker. You might just need to brush up on technique.

Try another recipe. The first step to superlative ice cream is having a good recipe, says Gail Damerow, an ice-cream maven from Tennessee. For those who aspire to connoisseurship, Damerow shows the way in her book, *Ice Cream: The Whole Scoop* (Glenbridge).

Start with a well-chilled custard base. Steve Johnson refrigerates his custard to 40°F before freezing it so his machine doesn't have to labor longer and harder than necessary.

Start the dasher turning before adding the custard, if possible. This is crucial for the pre-frozen cylinders. If the lid has no hole to pour in the custard, waste no time in securing the lid and crank. If you wait too long, the mixture will freeze to the sides, impeding the dasher.

Fill the canister no more than three-quarters full. As air is incorporated into the custard and ice crystals form, the ice cream expands. Overfilling the canister inhibits expansion and slows freezing.

Don't wait for the ice cream to get hard before stopping the machine. Ice cream is made in two stages: the first part is freezing, the second is hardening. When the mixture mounds softly, the freezing is complete. To firm up the ice cream enough to scoop it, store it in the freezer for an hour or two.

Store ice cream in small, airtight containers and blanket the surface with plastic. Try to minimize the formation of ice crystals during storage. Plastic wrap helps by keeping out air and moisture. Also, avoid digging wells in the ice cream when scooping. Instead, use a scraping motion that leaves a fairly level surface.

Make only as much as you can eat within a day or two. Homemade ice cream peaks a few hours after it's made.

haven't rusted from exposure to the brine) or new models in cook's catalogs for \$150 to \$200.

These old-fashioned machines, which come in electric and manual models, are unique in that you control the freezing temperature with the proportion of salt to ice. With the manual crank models, you also control the dasher speed. Bucket freezers are available in a variety of sizes, with the 4- and 6-quart sizes most common. And as long as you have a ready supply of ice and salt, you can make a second batch immediately after the first one is done.

The cons to bucket freezers are that they require a lot of crushed ice, the briny slush can be messy, and the electric motors are very loud. Also, since the mixture is poured into a closed metal canister, you can't see the ice cream so you need to pay attention to other clues to gauge doneness. Steve Johnson, the chef-owner of The Blue Room in Cambridge, Massachusetts, uses an electric 4-quart White Mountain to make all the ice cream at the restaurant. It makes such a racket that the machine has its own room outside the prep kitchen.

"When you go through that door to check on it, you can tell by listening if the ice cream is starting to thicken," Johnson says. "The machine sounds like when you're driving a stick shift and you need to shift into higher gear."

In the early '80s, home ice-cream machine technology took a giant leap forward with Donvier's invention of the sealed-in coolant machines, also called cylinder freezers. At room temperature, the antifreeze is liquid—shake the can and you'll hear sloshing. After several hours in the freezer, the liquid freezes, and the cylinder gets cold enough to freeze ice cream.

Cylinder freezers, which can be either manual or electric, usually hold 1 or 1½ quarts, are simple to use, and are affordable, about \$60. The manual versions let you control dasher speed. Turning every two minutes, according to the instructions, produced a dense, smooth ice cream in the *Fine Cooking* test kitchen. There's no reason not to turn constantly, however, if you want a lighter dessert.

The recurring complaint with the manual models is that sometimes too much of the custard mixture freezes to the sides of the canister early on, preventing the dasher from turning. Most electric versions circumvent that problem by providing a hole in the lid. The mixture gets poured in after the dasher has started to turn. The hole comes in handy later in the process, too, when you might add crushed cookies, chocolate chips, or other flavoring ingredients. The electric motor may be part of the base unit or mounted on the lid. Both styles work fine, but I found the bottom motor design to be less cumbersome.

The biggest disadvantage to sealed-in coolant models is the long pre-freezing time, which inhibits

Choosing the ice-cream machine that works best for you

The following ice-cream machines all produced good ice cream in the *Fine Cooking* test kitchen.

brand	price	capacity (in quarts)	type	freezing method	notes
Cuisinart	\$60	1½	electric (motor on bottom)	cylinder freezer	needs overnight freezing; has cubby hole for cord, but cord is short (38")
Donvier	\$43	1½	manual	cylinder freezer	needs overnight freezing; no hole in lid for adding mixture or flavorings
Krups	\$60	1½	electric (motor on top)	cylinder freezer	needs overnight freezing; long cord (5 feet) but no place to store it; cylinder and shell are one piece so it takes up more space in freezer
Simac Magnum	\$500	1⅓	electric	compression	big and bulky; occupies valuable counter and freezer space; can't be moved easily; removable bowl
White Mountain	\$200 to \$230	4 (6 available)	electric (manual available)	salt and ice	loud and somewhat messy

spontaneous ice-cream parties and immediate second batches. If you have lots of freezer space, you can just keep the canister in the freezer all the time.

At the opposite end of the technology and price scale are the self-cooling (also called self-contained) models that use compression to cool the ice-cream-making bowl. These are bulky, sensitive to being moved, and quite expensive, starting at \$400. They need about as much space as a bread machine, not just for the machine but also for its air vents. Some units have permanently installed mixing bowls, which are awkward to clean.

Self-cooling units can be worth the expense, however. They'll streamline the process if you make ice cream very frequently or for big crowds. Although their bowls usually make only 1½ or 2 quarts at a time, they can make batch after batch of ice cream without hesitation. They're also the easiest to use, demanding nothing except a brief (5- to 10-minute) pre-cooling period, which is accomplished with the mere push of a button before pouring in the custard.

Tom Palchak, the creamery manager at Penn State University, which has a national reputation for its ice-cream teaching department, prefers self-cooling models for home use. "It's the heat removal, the efficiency of it all," Palchak says. "I'd give the edge to technology, and that would be the self-contained units."

As for me, I'll stick with my manual Donvier cylinder freezer. I make ice cream fairly frequently, usually in small amounts. The Donvier is not only compact, reliable, and reasonably priced, but it's also portable. Not long ago I received a last-minute invi-

tation to dinner at a friend's house. I had no special wine in the cellar, but I had my Donvier canister in the freezer. I puréed some frozen strawberries in the blender, poured the sorbet mixture into the canister, and hopped in the car. It was my lucky day. I hit all the red lights, giving me plenty of time to stir.

Sarah Jay is an associate editor for *Fine Cooking*. ♦



Simple to operate and very consistent, self-cooling units are as hands-off as it gets.

Wrapping up a Savory Stir-Fry

Chewy, paper-thin pancakes made from an easy flour-and-water dough
make mu-shu pork irresistible

BY LILY LOH

If you've never had mu-shu pork, imagine a delicious pork stir-fry that, instead of being served with rice, gets wrapped in a tender, chewy pancake, tortilla style. This famous dish is from northern China where rice is seldom used; instead, flour-based noodles, steamed buns, and pancakes like these are served. The thin pancakes, called Mandarin pancakes, are the same as those featured in Peking duck. Indeed, mu-shu pork is known in China as the poor man's Peking duck, in part because very little meat is required, and in part because the duck takes at least a day to make, while the pork filling for mu-shu is ready in minutes.

While you can find mu-shu pork on many Chinese restaurant menus, it's a wonderful dish to make at

home because of the pancakes. Unfortunately, the pancakes served at most restaurants are often commercially made and they feel (and taste) like paper. They're very dry and—I'm sure this has happened to many of you—they often tear, causing the filling to fall out. Fresh homemade pancakes, on the other hand, are supple and slightly chewy; they surround the filling willingly, almost lovingly. Compared to the starch-white color of commercially made pancakes, they have a lovely golden color plus a little browning from the skillet, which adds just a bit of toasty flavor.

An easy hot-water dough gives the pancakes their pleasing texture

There are just three ingredients needed to make Mandarin pancakes: flour, water, and dark (toasted) sesame oil. Boiling the water before mixing it with the

For paper-thin pancakes, “sandwich” them



Give the shaggy water-and-flour dough a quick knead to smooth it out. The dough needs a half-hour rest to make it workable.



Roll the rested dough into a 12-inch log. Cut the log into 12 pieces.

Photos: bottom series, these pages: Joanne Smart; all others, Sloan Howard.



flour causes the starch in the flour to swell immediately and allows the flour to absorb more water. After kneading the dough briefly, it's important to let it rest for at least half an hour to relax the dough and make it easier to roll out.

Cooking two "sandwiched" pancakes at once saves time and allows for the thinnest pancakes possible. There's a wonderful trick to making these very thin pancakes, which is shown in the step-by-step photos below. Some say it developed as a time saver, but I think its main value is that it makes it easy for even the inexperienced pancake-maker to get pancakes that are perfectly paper-thin. Basically, you oil two rounds of dough, press them together, and roll them as flat as possible. After cooking them, you peel the two layers apart and wind up with two pancakes half as thin as the original. Because the pieces of

dough were oiled, they separate quite easily as long as they've been cooked correctly.

Cook the pancakes quickly but thoroughly. You want to cook the pancakes over medium-high heat. If the pan is too hot, the outside will brown before the inside has cooked through, and the pancakes will be difficult to pull apart and will taste floury. An overcooked one, however, will no longer be pliable. Cooking the pancakes correctly is easy as long as you're vigilant. Cook the first side for about a minute, and then turn it over and cook the other side briefly, another 30 seconds or less. The pancake is done when it begins to look less opaque and starts to bubble; a few brown spots are all right.

You'll know soon enough if you've got them right. For starters, they should be easy to peel apart while hot. Then check on a few pancakes after they've

Making—and eating—mu-shu pork means using your hands. Spoon or brush the sauce onto the pancake before filling and folding it.



Flatten each piece into 2-inch rounds, oil them, and pair them off. Press the oiled sides together to make a total of six sandwiches.



Roll each pair into one thin pancake, 7 inches across. Flip the pancake over as you go for even rolling.

cooled somewhat but before you've finished cooking the rest. The cooled pancakes should be pliable enough to roll. If they're brittle, cook the remaining pancakes for less time, lower your heat, or both.

You can make the pancakes ahead of the stir-fry—they can even be frozen—and reheat them by wrapping them in foil and heating them in a 350°F oven for a few minutes or steaming them in a bamboo steamer.

A delicious pork filling that feels both exotic and familiar

The filling for mu-shu pork is a pleasing jumble of textures and flavors. Its ingredients include finely sliced marinated pork, crunchy shredded cabbage, and soft-cooked scrambled eggs, broken up into pieces, as you'd find in fried rice. There are also a couple of ingredients that, despite their charming names, may seem off-putting: golden needles and cloud ears. Golden needles are dried tiger lily buds; cloud ears, also called wood ears, are pieces of dried black fungus. These ingredients, which are often paired in Chinese cooking, are likely more familiar to you than you think because they're featured in other popular Chinese dishes, notably hot and sour soup and the vegetarian dish called Buddha's Delight.

Both golden needles and cloud ears provide more in the way of texture than flavor. Good golden needles offer a slightly sweet or slightly musky flavor, and cloud ears mainly absorb the stronger flavors in the dish. Both are readily available in Asian markets (see Sources, p. 76, for mail-order options), both usually come packaged in cellophane, and both must be rehydrated before using in a stir-fry.



The pancakes get cooked one at a time.

You could say two at a time, since one gets split into two (see below).



While the pancake is still hot, find its seam and peel it into two.

The author is used to the heat, but you may want to wear rubber gloves to keep from burning yourself.

If you can't get your hands on golden needles, increase the amount of bamboo shoots in the recipe (another exotic-sounding ingredient but one that's available canned in most supermarkets). In place of the cloud ears, try reconstituted dried shiitakes; they won't have the same pleasant, slightly rubbery texture of the cloud ears, but they'll be delicious.

A tangy-sweet sauce completes the package

The third element of mu-shu pork is a thick sauce (the same one used for Peking duck) that gets brushed onto the pancake before the filling is added. A mixture of hoisin sauce, brown sugar, soy sauce, and sesame oil, the thick, slightly spicy sauce binds the flavor and texture of the filling to the pancake. The sauce, which can be made ahead and refrigerated, is also great added at the end to other stir-fries or brushed on grilled chicken and steak.

RECIPES

Mandarin Pancakes

This recipe can be doubled easily. After cooking, the pancakes may be refrigerated for three to four days or even frozen until ready to serve. Steam them to reheat. *Yields twelve 7-inch pancakes.*

8 oz. (1¾ cups) unbleached, all-purpose flour, preferably King Arthur or Pillsbury
¾ cup boiling water
1 Tbs. toasted sesame oil

In a bowl, mix the flour and the boiling water with chopsticks or a wooden spoon to combine. Turn the shaggy dough onto a lightly floured board, gather it into a heap, and knead it until smooth, about 3 min. Cover with a towel and let it rest for about ½ hour.

With your hands, shape the dough into an even cylinder about 12 inches long. With a sharp knife (I find gentle pressure and a serrated knife prevents squashing the dough), cut the roll into 1-inch pieces. If the cutting squashes any of the pieces, stand them on end and shape them back into rounds. Lightly flour your palms and use them to flatten the pieces into 2-inch rounds. Brush the top of each round generously with sesame oil. Lay one round on top of another, oiled sides together. Flatten the pair together with the heel of your hand. Continue until you have 6 pairs.

With a floured rolling pin, roll each pair into a thin pancake about 7 inches in diameter, flipping the pancake over now and again to roll evenly on both sides. Stack the pancakes as you finish rolling them.

In an ungreased cast-iron skillet or nonstick pan over medium-high heat, cook the pancakes one at a time. Heat one side until it becomes less opaque and starts to bubble slightly, and just a few brown spots appear, about 1 min. Flip it over and cook it until a few light brown spots appear on the other side, about 30 seconds. While the pancake is still hot, pick it up, look for a seam to grab, and separate it into two very thin pancakes. Stack them on a plate as you go and wrap them

in foil to keep them warm and prevent drying. If not using right away, refrigerate until ready to use.

Mandarin Sauce

Spread this sauce on the warm pancakes before adding the pork filling. Hoisin sauce, a sort of Chinese barbecue sauce, is available in most supermarkets. *Yields just over 1/2 cup.*

1/2 cup hoisin sauce
1 Tbs. brown sugar
1 Tbs. soy sauce
1 tsp. toasted sesame oil

Mix the ingredients together in a small bowl.

Mu-Shu Pork

Cloud ears, also called wood ears, are a dried black mushroom used in Chinese stir-fries. Golden needles, the dried buds of tiger lilies, are often simply called lily buds. Both products are available in Chinese markets and from the sources listed on p. 76. *Serves six.*

1/2 lb. lean pork, such as loin or tenderloin
2 Tbs. soy sauce
1 tsp. cornstarch
1 tsp. Chinese rice wine or dry sherry
1/4 cup dried cloud ears
1/2 cup golden needles (also called dried lily buds)
3 Tbs. canola or vegetable oil
1 slice fresh ginger, about 1 inch wide and 1/4 inch thick
4 eggs, beaten
1/4 lb. Savoy or white cabbage, shredded (about 2 cups)
1 scallion (white and green parts), cut lengthwise and then into 1/2-inch pieces
1/2 cup bamboo shoots, rinsed, drained, and sliced into a 2-inch julienne
1 tsp. salt

Cut the pork into 1/4-inch slices. Stack the slices and cut them into thin strips. In a medium bowl, mix the soy sauce, cornstarch, and rice wine. Add the sliced pork and toss to coat. In separate small bowls, soak the cloud ears and golden needles in warm water for about 10 min. Drain and rinse well. Cut off the stems



from the cloud ears and golden needles. Cut the cloud ears into small pieces and the golden needles in half.

Heat 2 Tbs. of the oil in a wok over medium-high heat. Add the ginger slice, cook it until sizzling and fragrant, and then remove and discard it. Add the eggs and scramble them, breaking them up into small pieces when just set. Remove the eggs from the wok and reserve. Heat another 1 Tbs. oil in the wok until very hot. Add the pork and cook, stirring, until about halfway cooked, about 45 seconds. Add the cabbage and cook, stirring, until transparent, about 1 min. Add the scallion, cloud ears, golden needles, bamboo shoots, and salt; cook, stirring constantly, about 3 min. Return the scrambled eggs to the wok to warm them. Mix well.

To serve, spread some sauce on a pancake, add some stir-fry, and then wrap and eat with your hands.

A tasty pork stir-fry cooks in minutes. Falling into the wok are rehydrated cloud ears (left) and golden needles (right).

Before heading to the Slovak Republic with her husband as volunteers in the Peace Corps, Lily Loh taught Chinese cooking from her home in southern California. She's the author of Lily Loh's Chinese Seafood & Vegetables (Solana). ♦

drink choices



Chinese rice wine is a natural partner for mu-shu pork

Sweet and salty, mu-shu pork is a myriad of textures and flavors all wrapped up in a tender pancake. On a warm day, I'd reach for a refreshing brew or an off-dry Riesling. But in the dead of winter, that chill might not be welcome.

Shaoxing rice wine, China's answer to sake, is

a natural partner for mu-shu pork. Golden brown in color, with complex, nutty flavors, it's served warm, like sake, and in small cups. Look for a red label on a tall, squared-off bottle at well-stocked Asian or international markets.

If you can't find Shaoxing, sherry is a good substitute,

both in the recipe and in the glass. Lustau Oloroso or Dry Sack Medium Dry from Spain and Australia's Seppelt Amontillado all work well. Try warming it first, either in a hot water bath or in the microwave.

If you want to have beer, go with something rich and malty to stand up to the

caramel-tasting Mandarin sauce. Look for Honey Brown Ale from J.W. Dundee in New York, Five Malt Ale by Devil Mountain in California, or Sapporo Black from Japan.

Rosina Tinari Wilson teaches and writes about wine and food pairing in the San Francisco Bay area.

Planning and Prepping to

Mise en place means preparing ingredients up to the point of cooking so that your meals—and your kitchen—run smoothly

BY TONI LYDECKER

Have you ever watched a cooking demonstration and noticed how effortlessly the chef assembled a complicated dish? The chef's quick, sure motions may come from years of practice, but there's another reason the cooking proceeds so smoothly. By "prepping" ingredients beforehand, the chef has simplified the final assembly. Instead of stopping repeatedly—to, say, chop mushrooms, open a bottle of wine, or wash parsley—the chef fluidly adds to the pan ingredients that have already been washed, chopped, and measured.

Professional cooks use a system called *mise en place* (a French phrase, pronounced *meezahn PLAHHS*, that means "put in place") to organize their work. *Mise en place* means having all your ingredients ready up to the point of cooking or assembling, and it does more than keep a cooking show moving at a lively pace. For me, the principles of *mise en place* improve my overall cooking by allowing me to think clearly and move quickly, especially when I have several dishes to prepare.

The first step of *mise en place*: think things through

Before you even start to wash and chop, read your recipe, if you're using one. This may sound obvious, but even the best cooks can be caught off guard by not planning or reading ahead.

The ingredient list, obviously, lets you know the items you'll need to complete the recipe. Most ingredient lists will also include any straightforward prepping you need to do: "2 shallots, finely chopped" or "5 tablespoons butter, softened." The more complicated procedures, however, are usually found in the recipe text, which is why you need to read through to the end.

By thoughtfully reading the recipe text, you also learn that you should have the dry ingredients for your cake measured and sifted in a small bowl, your eggs separated, and your butter melted. Reading through long, involved recipes also allows you to break down the elements and spread out the work over time. For instance, you might make the filling and sauce for ravioli the day before you make the pasta dough.



Here the cook is making a rice pilaf, sautéed spinach, and veal scaloppine with capers and brown butter. Before any burners are turned on, all the cleaning, cutting, and measuring is done. Notice the tray for collecting the debris from the vegetables.

Rough out the sequence to determine your timing. A good recipe has its steps written in an order that makes good timing sense. For instance, every soufflé recipe calls for whipping the egg whites just before incorporating them to minimize the risk that they'll deflate. At the other end of the timing spectrum is the custard that needs an overnight chill before you can churn it into ice cream or the chicken that needs to marinate at least a couple of hours before you can throw it on the grill.

Getting a sense of timing is especially critical when you're trying to coordinate several dishes that each have tricky timing. If you're sautéing spinach to go with your veal scaloppine, you'll need to cook both simultaneously. This isn't a difficult task if your spinach is washed and trimmed, the butter is out, and the pan is on the stove. Then as you're sautéing the veal on one burner, you can easily cook the spinach on another.

Evaluate your ingredients. Do a visual check of ingredients well ahead of time. If I'm going to discover that there are only a few drops of maple syrup when I need a cup, I'd rather find out before I start the recipe, not while making it. And give perishable ingredients a close inspection to verify freshness.

Look for an overlap of ingredients in recipes. By chopping extra parsley or grating more cheese, you may be able

Improve Your Cooking



After having put all the pans on deck and cleaning and stemming the spinach, she starts her pilaf.

to avoid repeating the same step for another dish.

Consider equipment as part of *mise en place*. Although not always mentioned in recipes, equipment and utensils are part of the *mise en place*. You

may find too late in the game that a tomato sauce requires a pass through a food mill or that a certain bread requires a baking stone. *Mise en place* also includes lining baking sheets with parchment or making sure your 10-inch sauté pan is clean.

Mise en place takes some time but saves more

Once you have carefully thought through your recipe, it's time to wash, trim, weigh, toast, measure, chop, slice, sift, soften, chill, blanch, melt, mince, drain—all those things that need to be done before the final cooking. This prep work may seem mundane, but it's the foundation of success in executing almost any recipe.

Begin by choosing a logical "station" for each *mise en place*. I set salad makings to the right of my sink, because most need washing, while I put ingredients for baked goods conveniently near my mixer and pastry board.

Clean and prep with care. I take my time cleaning leeks, for instance, since I know that any grit left behind could spoil the dish. If I'm prepping in advance, I store the ingredient properly: covering potatoes with cold water or freezing dough for a pie crust that I'll bake next week.

The right containers make measuring go faster. Graduated mixing bowls work well for holding medium to large amounts of ingredients. Ramekins or little bowls are good for smaller amounts, such as garlic and ginger intended for a stir-fry. I also use paper plates or, for advance prep work, plastic zip-top bags.



The seasoned flour for coating the veal is set next to the stove so that the cutlets can go right into the pan. Note the capers and butter for the veal.

Err on the generous side when you're unsure of quantities—especially if prepping more later would be inconvenient. If I'm making lasagne, I'd rather cook a few extra noodles than risk running short.

Not everything needs to be measured ahead. Measuring at assembly time, rather than in advance, makes sense when quantities are in doubt or needn't be precise. For a vinaigrette, for example, you could group oil, vinegar, salt, and pepper, each in its own container, ready to be combined and tasted.

Clean as you go. Remember that *mise en place* means to put in place—this means garbage, too. As you trim the vegetables, throw away (or compost) the inedible portions cluttering your workspace. Carefully wash your cutting board after trimming raw chicken to avoid cross-contamination. Put away the flour canister to make room on the counter for your mixer.

Mise en place as kitchen philosophy

Mise en place affects just about everything you do in the kitchen. Thoughtful purchasing and placement of ingredients pay off in speedier food preparation with fewer glitches. This means replenishing staples before they run out and storing frequently used ingredients and equipment where they're accessible. The kosher salt I use all the time stands in a covered jar next to the stove, while the tongs and spatulas that I reach for most often are in an easily accessible drawer. I also group pantry items that are destined for the same recipes. Keeping items used for baking in one spot, for example, means fewer trips to the pantry when baking a cake.

Toni Lydecker, author of Serves One: Super Meals for Solo Cooks (Lake Isle Press), lives in Irvington-on-Hudson, New York. ♦



Timing is everything. When the rice is almost done, the cutlets and spinach get cooked.

Onions, already sautéed, await the washed greens.

Making Desserts with Nutty Frangipane



Start by grinding almonds and sugar until the mixture looks like cornmeal.

A simple mix of ground almonds, sugar, eggs, and butter makes a fragrant and versatile filling for tarts, cakes, and cookies

BY FLO BRAKER



Next add eggs, butter, and flavorings such as vanilla extract, almond extract, or dark rum.



To complete the frangipane, just process the mixture until creamy.

Long before I ever dreamed of becoming a professional baker, I tasted all kinds of desserts all over the world. Some of my favorites were croissants, Danish pastries, and fruit tarts that all contained an elusive almond flavor that I couldn't identify. Soon I solved the mystery. The perfumy, moist almond filling that enhanced flaky pastry and intensified buttery crusts was frangipane. I'm still impressed with the incredible versatility of this rich combination of finely ground almonds, sweet butter, eggs, and sugar.

I've always used frangipane (pronounced FRAN-juh-pan) in its classic role as the filling for the French puff pastry treat, *Pithiviers*, but recently I decided to see just how far this almond pastry cream could go. I came up with a pound cake, a fruit tart, and a phyllo variation of a *Pithiviers* (pronounced pee-tee-VYAY) that all showed me how delectably versatile frangipane really is.

Frangipane is simple to make and deliciously adaptable

For the richest-tasting frangipane, the freshest almonds are essential, of course—they should taste crunchy and sweet.

Use blanched or unblanched almonds, depending on the look you want. Blanched almonds will produce an ivory-colored frangipane; unblanched almonds give the frangipane a golden color. I prefer to use sliced almonds because they're easier to measure exactly. (Sliced almonds are the thin, flat ovals, as compared to slivered almonds, which are like thick matchsticks.) Sliced almonds are easier to grind, too; if you're using a food processor, there's less danger of overgrinding them to the nut-butter stage. But it's fine to use whole or slivered almonds, as long as you're careful not to grind them too long.

Almonds, sugar, butter, and eggs in equal proportions by weight make up a traditional frangipane filling. Varying the proportions of these ingredients makes this delectable component even more versatile. A few drops of vanilla extract, almond extract, or rum bring out the almondy taste and add other flavor notes.

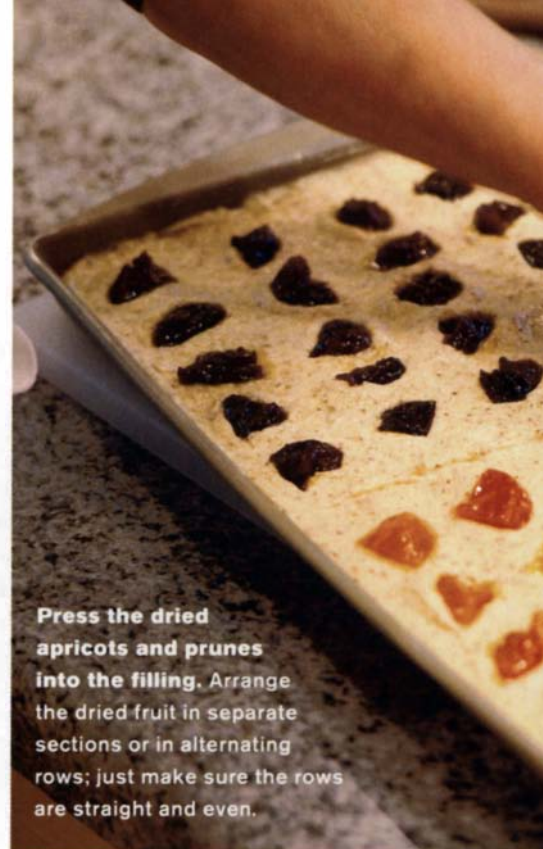
Mixing is fastest and easiest with a food processor. You'll grind the nuts to a fine meal, staying clear of grinding all the way to a nut butter. While you can grind the nuts for frangipane by hand with



"Frangipane is one of the most versatile pastry fillings," says Flo Braker. "It's a fundamental component for any baker's repertoire."



Spread the frangipane filling evenly over the baked and cooled tart crust.



Press the dried apricots and prunes into the filling. Arrange the dried fruit in separate sections or in alternating rows; just make sure the rows are straight and even.

a cheese or nut rotary grinder, it's a snap with a food processor.

Play up the almond flavor and vary the consistency

Frangipane should taste rich without being cloying. One way to make sure the almond flavor comes through is to give the nuts a light toasting before grinding them. Another way is to add a few drops of

Unlike marzipan,
frangipane isn't dense,
nor is it cloyingly sweet.

almond extract, as in the Prune-Apricot Tart at right. Be careful, though: almond extract has a powerful flavor, and one too many drops can be overwhelming.

Vary frangipane's consistency to suit its role. To lay down moist, nutty ribbons of filling in a rich pound cake (see recipe, far right), I make a thicker frangipane by adding a little store-bought almond paste, which helps the filling stay moist and creamy and keep its shape during baking. The prune-apricot tart bars contain a traditional frangipane filling; the phyllo *Pithiviers* filling has similar proportions.

If you're not using the frangipane right away, store it covered in the refrigerator for up to two days, or in the freezer for up to ten.

RECIPES

Prune-Apricot Frangipane Tart

Use kitchen scissors to cut the dried fruit. *Fills a 10x15-inch pan (to yield thirty 1 $\frac{2}{3}$ x3-inch bars) or two 9-inch round tart pans.*

FOR THE FRUIT & FRANGIPANE FILLING:

- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup fresh orange juice**
- 1 cup plus 2 Tbs. sugar**
- 8 dried prunes, pitted and quartered**
- 8 dried apricots, quartered**
- 8 oz. (2 $\frac{1}{4}$ cups) sliced unblanched almonds**
- 4 eggs**
- 8 oz. (16 Tbs.) unsalted butter, softened at room temperature**
- 1 Tbs. dark rum**
- $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. pure vanilla extract**
- $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. almond extract**

FOR THE TART CRUST:

- 9 oz. (2 cups) all-purpose flour**
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup sugar**
- $\frac{1}{8}$ tsp. salt**
- 6 oz. (12 Tbs.) unsalted butter, chilled and diced**
- 1 egg, lightly beaten**

To simmer the fruit—In a small saucepan, combine the orange juice and 2 Tbs. of the sugar. Bring to a boil and cook until the liquid is reduced by almost one-third, about 3 min. Reduce the heat; add the prunes and apricots, keeping each to one side of the pan (they'll be easier to fish out this way). Simmer for about 3 min., stirring occasionally. Remove from the heat and set aside.

To make the frangipane—In a food processor, blend the almonds with the remaining 1 cup sugar to a cornmeal consistency. Add the eggs, butter, rum, vanilla extract, and almond extract; process until creamy and set aside.



Frangipane, almond paste, and marzipan

While the ingredients in these three fillings are similar, each has a distinct character and decidedly different uses.

Frangipane, also called almond cream, is a classic almond pastry filling usually made with equal proportions by weight of ground almonds, butter, sugar, and eggs. Sometimes flour is added for body. According to the *Larousse Gastronomique*, frangipane is named for an Italian count named Frangipani. In the 16th century, he developed an almond perfume that Parisian pastry makers used to flavor almond pastry filling.

Almond paste, often mistaken for marzipan, is a firm paste of almonds and sugar finely ground between heavy-duty rollers. Almond paste is often used in cake batters, pastry fillings, or mixed with hot sugar syrup to be shaped into marzipan.

Marzipan is sweeter, denser, and more pliable than almond paste, due to the addition of hot sugar syrup and light corn syrup or glucose. Marzipan can be rolled into sheets to cover cake layers, used as a filling for chocolates, and made into confections that are often colored and shaped to resemble fruit, flowers, or vegetables.

It's part tart, part cookie— but Prune-Apricot Frangipane Tart is always moist and tender. You can also bake it in a round tart pan.

To make the tart crust—Position a rack in the lower third of the oven; heat the oven to 350°F. In a food processor, briefly blend the flour, sugar, and salt. Add the butter; pulse until the mixture resembles cornmeal. Add the egg and process just until the dough comes together into a ball. Pat the dough into a 6x4-inch rectangle. On a lightly floured surface, roll the pastry into a rectangle that's about 9x12 inches. Drape it around the pin and transfer to an ungreased 10x15-inch rimmed baking sheet. Press the dough so it just fits the bottom of the pan (it's all right if the dough cracks). Bake until light golden, 10 to 13 min.; the crust will look set and won't be shiny on top. Cool the pan on a wire rack and then pour the frangipane onto the baked crust, spreading it evenly over the dough. Score a shallow center line to divide the tart in half. Remove the fruit from the juice (you don't need to pat it dry; the juices will dry during baking). Arrange half the tart with dried apricots and half with dried prunes in five rows of six pieces each, gently pressing the pieces into the filling. Bake until the top is light golden and springs back when lightly pressed, 25 to 30 min.

Frangipane Ripple Chocolate Pound Cake

For the best flavor and easiest slicing, serve this cake a day after you bake it. I use Blue Diamond canned almond paste, but if you use almond paste from a tube, which is softer, the frangipane will need less time to soften when you take it out of the refrigerator. *Yields about 20 slices.*

FOR THE ALMOND PASTE FRANGIPANE:
1¼ oz. (⅓ cup) sliced blanched almonds
4 oz. (½ cup) almond paste

(ingredient list continues)





Spoon the frangipane onto the cake batter for Frangipane Ripple Chocolate Pound Cake (bottom photo). Don't let the filling touch the sides of the pan.



Top with 1½ cups more batter, and then lay down the remaining frangipane for the second layer of filler. Spoon the remaining cake batter over evenly.



(Frangipane Ripple Chocolate Pound Cake continued)

¼ cup sugar

1 egg

2 oz. (4 Tbs.) unsalted butter, softened at room temperature

FOR THE CAKE:

9¼ oz. (2⅓ cups) cake flour; more for the pan

2 tsp. baking powder

¼ tsp. salt

2½ oz. (¾ cup) unsweetened Dutch-processed cocoa

10 oz. (20 Tbs.) unsalted butter, softened at room temperature; more for the pan

2 cups sugar

3 eggs

1 tsp. pure vanilla extract

1 cup whole milk

To make the frangipane—In a food processor, blend the almonds, almond paste, and sugar until the nuts are finely ground. Add the egg and butter; process until smoothly blended. Cover and refrigerate.

To make the cake—Remove the frangipane from the refrigerator and make sure all other ingredients are at room temperature. Position a rack in the lower third of the oven and heat the oven to 350°F (325°F if your cake pan has a dark finish). Grease and lightly flour a 12-cup bundt pan. Sift together the cake flour, baking powder, salt, and cocoa; set aside. Using the beater attachment on an electric mixer (or the paddle attachment, if you have one), beat the butter at medium speed until creamy and smooth, 30 to 45 seconds. Add the sugar. Beat until the mixture is fluffy and light in color, 4 to 5 min., scraping down the bowl as needed. Add the eggs one at a time, beating well after each addition. Add the vanilla. At very low speed, add the dry ingredients alternately with the milk in three additions, starting and ending with the dry ingredients, blending just until smooth. Scrape down the sides of the bowl as needed.

Spoon about 2 cups of batter into the pan, spreading evenly. Spoon half the frangipane filling in dollops over the center of the batter. Spread the filling evenly over the batter, avoiding the center tube and the sides of the pan (to achieve a neat, contained design). Spoon about 1½ cups of batter evenly over the filling. Spoon the remaining frangipane over the batter, spreading evenly. Spoon the remaining batter over evenly.

Bake just until the cake springs back lightly when touched in the center and just starts to come away from the sides of the pan, 60 to 65 min. (65 to 70 min. with a dark pan at 325°F). Transfer the pan to a cooling rack. Cool the cake upright in the pan for 15 to 20 min. before inverting. Cool the cake completely on a wire rack.

Frangipane-Phyllo Pithiviers

Frozen phyllo is easiest to handle if you thaw it in the refrigerator and remove the package from the fridge about an hour before assembly. The *Pithiviers* tastes best the day you bake it, and it's delicious served as a tea cake. *Serves eight.*

FOR THE FRANGIPANE:

2½ oz. (½ cup plus 3 Tbs.) sliced unblanched almonds

½ cup sugar

1 egg

2 egg yolks



A "pre-fab" stack of phyllo sheets makes assembly easier.



Frangipane-Phyllo Pithiviers is an adaptation of the French classic. Instead of layers of flaky puff pastry, Flo Braker uses layers of phyllo dough.

2½ oz. (5 Tbs.) unsalted butter, softened at room temperature
2 tsp. dark rum
Scant ¼ tsp. almond extract

FOR THE PASTRY:

4 oz. (8 Tbs.) unsalted butter, melted
11 sheets phyllo dough, each 12x17 inches
1¾ oz. (½ cup) sliced unblanched almonds, toasted and chopped

To make the frangipane—In a food processor, blend the almonds and sugar until the nuts are finely ground. Add the egg, egg yolks, butter, rum, and almond extract; process until smoothly blended. Cover and refrigerate the filling.

To assemble the shell—Position a rack in the lower third of the oven; heat the oven to 375°F. Brush the bottom and sides of an 8-inch round, 2-inch deep cake pan with melted butter. Stack the phyllo sheets and halve them crosswise with a sharp knife to make 12x8½-inch sheets. Keep them covered with plastic and then a damp towel. Brush one half sheet with the melted butter and ease it into the prepared pan, allowing the ends to extend up the sides of the pan. Sprinkle with about 2 tsp. of the chopped almonds. Brush another half sheet with butter and lay it over the first sheet perpendicular to the first sheet (so it forms a cross). Sprinkle with another 2 tsp. chopped almonds. Continue buttering, layering, and sprinkling, crisscrossing the sheets so they evenly cover the bottom and sides of the pan, using another nine half sheets of phyllo. Spoon the frangipane into the phyllo-lined pan, spreading evenly. Snip the edges of the phyllo to leave an even 1½-inch border. Fold the border over the filling; brush the top of the phyllo with melted butter.

Using the cake pan as a guide, cut six 8-inch rounds out of six more phyllo half sheets. Brushing each layer generously with melted butter, stack the rounds on plastic wrap. With a sharp paring knife, cut a ¾-inch

circle in the center to allow steam to escape during baking. Score the top layers, starting ½ inch from the circle vent, with 8 semicircle cuts, pinwheel-style. Transfer the stack to the top of the filling, patting gently to seal (or do the scoring after you transfer the top).

Bake until puffed and golden, 30 to 40 min. Remove the *Pithiviers* from the oven and let cool for about 10 min. before carefully removing it from the pan and transferring it, vent side up, to a serving platter. Serve warm or at room temperature.

Flo Braker wrote The Simple Art of Perfect Baking (Chapters) and Sweet Miniatures (to be reissued by Chronicle Books in the autumn of 2000). ♦



wine choices

Sweet Tokay brings out the nutty flavor of frangipane

When light fruit like apricot shares top billing with the frangipane, serve wines with the same flavors. Sauternes is ideal: if Santa didn't bring any Château d'Yquem, then Rieussec or Suduiraut will do nicely. Late-harvest whites such as St. Supéry Moscato or Handley White Riesling add a lovely floral note.

To bring out the nut flavor in any of the recipes, and to stand up to the deeper, darker flavors of chocolate and prune, try a Stanton

and Killeen Tokay from Rutherglen in Australia, or the original Hungarian Tokaji Aszu.

You won't go wrong trotting out the cordials, either. Try Grand Marnier, made with orange and brandy; Frangelico, based on hazelnut; or Nocello, an Italian walnut liqueur—any of them would make a luxurious finale.

Rosina Tinari Wilson teaches and writes about wine and food pairing in the San Francisco Bay area.

Chocolate keeps best when dry and cool

When I told a friend that I was writing about how to store chocolate, she chortled, “Who stores chocolate? I just eat it.” True, good chocolate tends to disappear quickly, but for those with strong willpower, here’s how to store it so that it stays in perfect condition.

Chocolate is a delicate emulsion of cocoa solids

then you have to worry about the second type of bloom. Sugar bloom occurs when the chocolate gets moist, either from humidity in the air or condensation from refrigeration, causing sugar to come to the surface. When the moisture evaporates, the sugar remains, giving your chocolate a pale, speckled coating.

To prevent sugar bloom, take a cue from the chocolate manufacturers and wrap chocolate tightly in foil and then in paper or plastic to protect it

from humidity. If you store properly wrapped chocolate in the refrigerator or freezer, condensation will form on the wrapping instead of on the chocolate. Wait until the chocolate is room temperature before unwrapping it and it will be dry and bloom-free. Avoid thawing and refreezing the same piece of chocolate. I divide larger bars into smaller portions before wrapping.

A final caution: keep chocolate away from strong odors.



Not cool enough.
Excessive heat leads to swirls of fat bloom.

Chocolate can absorb the flavors of nearby foods, even in the freezer. With their higher fat contents and milder tastes, milk and white chocolate are even more susceptible to this undesirable flavor exchange.

Molly Stevens is a contributing editor for *Fine Cooking*. ♦



Wrap well.
Prevent sugar bloom by wrapping snugly in foil and plastic.

and cocoa butter (and often sugar, vanilla, and lecithin). When properly stored in a cool, dry spot (65°F with low humidity), the emulsion remains stable for months—milk chocolate will last at least nine months, and dark chocolate for over a year. Excessive heat and humidity break down the emulsion, causing a dull, gray film, called bloom, to mar the chocolate’s shiny surface. Bloom doesn’t spoil the chocolate’s flavor, but it can affect the way it melts.

Two types of bloom—fat bloom and sugar bloom. Fat bloom occurs when the chocolate gets too warm (warmer than 75°F is risky). The cocoa butter rises to the surface, leaving whitish gray streaks or swirls on the chocolate. To keep the chocolate cool, you can refrigerate or freeze it, but

Waxed paper vs. parchment

The biggest difference: parchment can take the heat

Cake recipes often say to line the baking pan with waxed paper or parchment, as if the two were interchangeable. As liners for cake pans they are, but in many other ways, they are not.

Waxed paper is tissue paper that’s been coated with paraffin on both sides, making it greaseproof and moistureproof. It’s great for wrapping fatty or juicy foods, and its slippery, waxy surface means that gooey foods, such as candy and soft cheese, won’t stick.

Waxed (or wax) paper is neither heavy-duty nor all-purpose. It eventually lets liquids soak through, it tears easily, and it isn’t heatproof (the wax eventually starts to melt). But waxed paper can be used in the oven if it’s completely covered and protected from the heat. For example, waxed paper isn’t good for baking cookies because the exposed portions would smoke and char, but it’s fine at the bottom of a batter-filled cake or brownie pan.

Parchment is super-strong, even when wet. Parchment is made by running sheets of paper through a sulfuric acid bath,

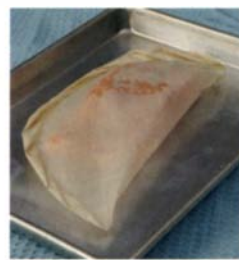
a process that makes the paper strong even when it gets wet or hot. The surface of parchment, also called sulfurized paper, is hard, smooth, and impermeable so it won’t soak up grease or moisture. Many manufacturers also apply a silicone coating to make it entirely nonstick, which is why this kind of parchment is sometimes called silicone paper.

Parchment is ideal for wrapping moist foods, for cooking *en papillote* (where the paper needs to hold up even when filled with steam), and for cutting a makeshift lid for a skillet to trap the moisture of vegetables cooking on the stovetop. It’s also a terrific baking pan liner because it can withstand high temperatures and because it’s nonstick.

While parchment is more expensive than waxed paper, it can be a better value since it’s so versatile and, unlike waxed paper, it’s reusable as a pan liner. You can buy rolls of parchment in supermarkets, but I prefer to use sheets of parchment (sold in restaurant-supply stores) because they don’t curl up.



You can use waxed paper to line a cake pan, but you’ll need parchment to cook *en papillote*.



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Orange Basil Roast Chicken

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1 Reynolds® Oven Bag,
large size (14" x 20") | 1 large orange, thinly sliced, divided |
| 1 tablespoon flour | 1 medium onion, sliced |
| 5 to 7 pound whole roasting chicken | Vegetable oil |
| 8 large fresh basil leaves | 1 teaspoon freshly ground
black pepper |

PREHEAT oven to 350°F.

SHAKE flour in Reynolds Oven Bag; place in 13x9x2-inch baking pan. **LOOSEN** skin of chicken over breast area by slipping your fingers or a knife under the skin. Place basil leaves and 4 orange slices under the skin. Divide onion slices and remaining orange slices between cavity of chicken and bottom of oven bag. Tuck the wings under the chicken and tie legs together, if desired. Brush chicken with vegetable oil; sprinkle with pepper. Place chicken in oven bag on top of onion and orange slices. **CLOSE** oven bag with nylon tie; cut six 1/2-inch slits in top. **BAKE** 1 1/4 to 1 1/2 hours or until chicken is tender.

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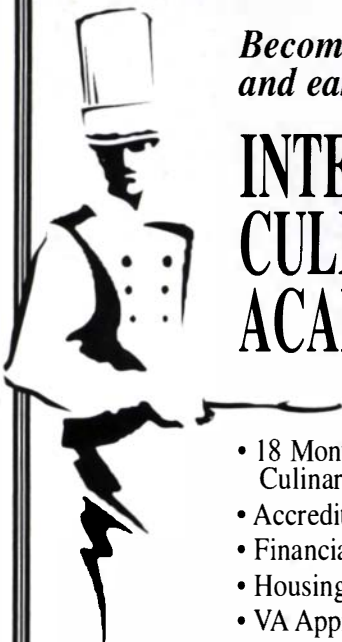
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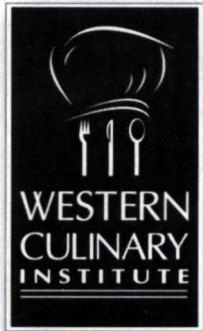
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Have utensils, will travel could be Susan Titcomb's motto. Ten years ago, Titcomb, a 38 year old mother of two from San Diego, California, had a passion for cooking and a desire to control her own destiny. Armed with an idea, her husband's support, very little capital and virtually no business experience, she started the country's first personal chef service. Personally Yours Personal Chef Service became an overnight success and spurred her on to become a cofounder of the United States Personal Chef Association. "A personal chef can make \$35,000 to \$50,000 a year, depending upon the hours worked and the number of clients", says Titcomb. Since most clients work full-time, Titcomb goes into their home and

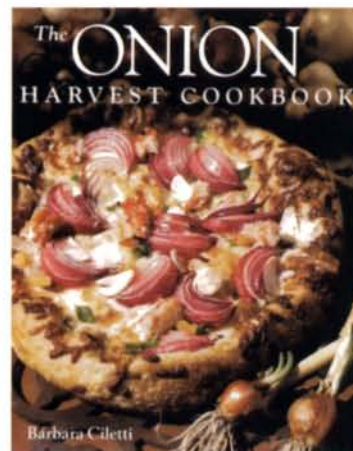


cooks 10 meals for the whole family. Her service includes grocery shopping, preparation, cooking, packaging and cleanup. With a cost as low as \$8 per meal, per person, Titcomb has a long waiting list. So what does it take to become a personal chef? "Organization, persistence, a love of cooking and a little know how," says Titcomb. *For more information, call the United States Personal Chef Association at 1-800-995-2138.*

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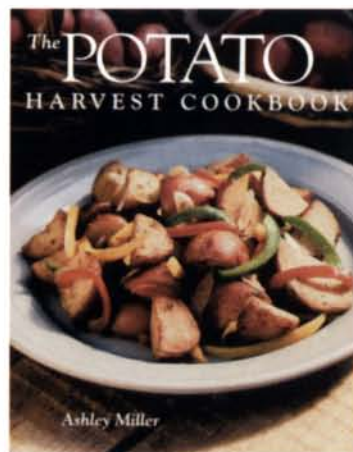
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A Cookbook to Answer All Your Pie and Pastry Questions

I was not born a pie baker," writes Rose Levy Beranbaum in her latest cookbook, aptly titled *The Pie & Pastry Bible*. I'm struck by her humble words because neither was I. Raised in a traditional Chinese household, I didn't have my first piece of pie until I left home for college (unless you count those deep-fried apple pies from McDonald's). Now I'm a pastry chef.

When I learned that Beranbaum had produced a follow-up to her comprehensive tome, *The Cake Bible*, I was immediately intrigued. Would she be able to replicate her confident, conversational tone in this book? Would *The Pie & Pastry Bible* answer all my questions about pastries, as well as those that I didn't even think to ask, as *The Cake Bible* does? Would these new recipes be as tempting and mouth-watering as her cakes? *The Cake Bible* is one of the most well-read and dog-eared cookbooks I own. After spending many hours reviewing it, I know that *The Pie & Pastry Bible* is bound to follow suit.

One of the things I like most about this book is that it will appeal to all bakers, from beginners to the most advanced. Beranbaum's explanations and directions are painstakingly detailed—perfect for the neophyte baker who wants to learn how to

make a no-fail flaky pie crust or a lemon meringue pie that won't weep. Readers with more experience will appreciate the sections headlined "Understanding" that follow many recipes. In these instructive segments, Beranbaum delves into the chemistry of a baking process, explains the reasoning behind the addition of a nontraditional ingredient, or suggests an innovative shortcut. Did you know that if you stir a bit of unbeaten egg white into a

***The Pie & Pastry Bible*, by Rose Levy Beranbaum. Scribner, 1998. \$35, hardcover; 692 pp. ISBN 0-684-81348-3.**

tests to develop it) to Deluxe Chocolate Wafer Crumb Crust to Sweet Peanut Butter Cookie Tart Crust. Following

Beranbaum writes as if her
memory of learning about baking
is still fresh in her mind.

soufflé batter, the batter has more structure, thus preventing your soufflés from falling when they come out of the oven? I didn't, but you can be sure I'll use this trick on my next batch of soufflés.

The book is broadly divided into a pie section and a pastry section. The pie section couldn't be more complete, with an introductory chapter on crusts, and not just one or two but *fifteen* different crusts, ranging from Flaky Cream Cheese Pie Crust (Beranbaum's favorite; it took her several years and over fifty

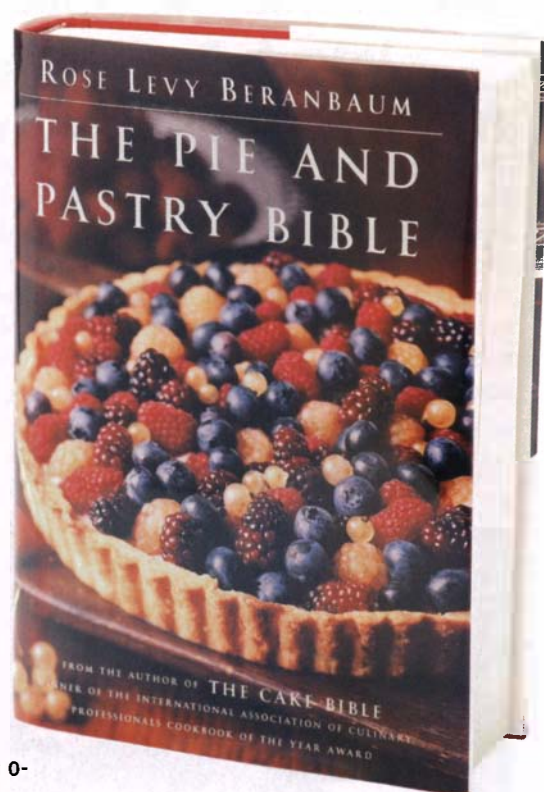
that is a chapter on fruit pies, then chiffon pies, custard pies, meringue pies, ice cream pies, and when you thought that there were no more pies to talk about, she includes a chapter on savory pies like Deep Dish Chicken Pot Pies.

The pastry section is a bit less comprehensive—I just don't think you can write about all the pastry in the world in one book—but no less full of irresistible recipes such as Apple Strudel with made-from-scratch strudel dough, ooey-gooey Sticky Buns, rich Chocolate Mousse

Napoleons, and traditional creamy Eclairs.

Each recipe begins with an anecdote about how it got its name or how it was developed. Beranbaum's warm tone shines through, as she enthusiastically introduces a recipe and entices you to try it. You can't resist a Chocolate Oblivion Tartlet that features "chocolate at its most intense flavor and perfect consistency...the creamiest of truffles married to the purest chocolate mousse" or a Lemon Pucker Pie that is "lemony, tart, and moist and fluffy...and so utterly delicious" that it has been trademarked.

Beranbaum writes as if her memory of learning about baking is still fresh in her mind. Ingredients are conveniently listed in large charts with volume, American weight, and metric weight measurements. Each recipe is thoroughly explained as if Beranbaum were cooking



along with you; the parenthetical warnings and clarifications that dot the recipes throughout make you feel as if she has committed a certain mistake before and wants to prevent you from repeating it. All the recipes come with serving and storage suggestions, and many are followed by "Pointers for Success" to ensure that your pastry comes out picture-perfect.

I couldn't wait to start testing and tasting the recipes. I succumbed to Beranbaum's persuasions and made a batch of Chocolate Oblivion Tartlets for a few friends. The filling was a delectable blend of intense, deep chocolate and ethereal texture to whose addictiveness my friends can attest. Unfortunately, this was only after a second try, as I botched my first trial because I misunderstood the recipe. The chart that lists the ingredients in this recipe (and in a couple of others) isn't as clearly divided as it should be, and I wound up using twice as much chocolate as I should have.

A Pear Tart with Almond Cream was as beautiful as any I have seen in pastry shops, thanks to Beranbaum's clear instructions on how to feather the pears and glaze them so that they shine. From making the flaky crust, to poaching the pears in a flavored syrup, to mixing a batch of almond cream, the instructions were clear and the results flawless. The flavor was simple and strong, and everyone at the dinner party I brought it to declared it a winner. Watching the host sneak a slice of leftover tart as he was cleaning up was for me the true testament of the dessert's success.

Beranbaum raves about her currant scones and after making them for coffee with a friend, I can understand why. These were flaky and tender at the same time, with just the right amount of sugar. The process was easy, as it is for most scones, with the added twist of folding or "turning" the dough, which contributes to its delicate,

layered texture. This recipe is going into my permanent file.

With a book this size, a few small editorial lapses seem inevitable, such as the aforementioned ingredient snafu and an occasional recipe that refers to a variation that isn't included. But these oversights are truly minor given the breadth and depth of pastry experience Beranbaum shares

with us. She may not have been born a pie baker, but she makes it seem as if she's been baking pies and pastries all her life. More important, *The Pie & Pastry Bible* makes you feel this way, too.

Joanne Chang is the pastry chef at Mistral in Boston. She wrote "Holiday Cookies" in *Fine Cooking* #30. ♦

From which cookbook did you first learn to bake a pie or tart?

"The first tart recipe I ever baked was from a 4-H cookbook. It was called Fruit Pizza (or something like that) and my memory is surely being kind to the result we got. I distinctly remember learning that you shouldn't measure your ingredients over the bowl. I was about ten years old and I thought that was the greatest advice I'd ever heard."

—Joanne Smart, associate editor, *Fine Cooking*

"Making Julia Child's apple tart from *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* is what I remember most. It was pretty fabulous. I also loved a recipe that I think I clipped from *Sunset* magazine. It was kind of an upside-down thing called Topsy-Turvy Apple Pie."

—Leslie Revsin, author of the forthcoming *Fabulous Food* (Doubleday)

"My best tart crust, if not my first, came from *Lulu's Provençal Table* by Richard Olney. The *pâte brisée* Lulu uses for her tarts is just fabulous. I turn to it whenever I make savory tarts."

—Sarah Jay, associate editor, *Fine Cooking*

"My first pie experience was baking my mother's chocolate pie, which was really weird but really wonderful. The crust was made with oil instead of a solid fat. For the filling, you blended lots of raw eggs, sugar, butter, and chocolate and just let it set up in the fridge—the texture was incredible. I've never come across any other pie like it. The first cookbook that changed my pie-baking life was a French book by Joël Robuchon. I still use his buttery-crisp *pâte sucrée* and frangipane filling for tarts."

—Martha Holmberg, editor, *Fine Cooking*

"The cookbook would definitely be my mother's copy of *Fanny Farmer* which no longer has its cover or front pages, so I don't know what year it was published. But I also learned a lot from a series in *McCall's* magazine called "cooking class." I baked all kinds of things like floating islands and Virginia sponge cake for my family."

—Abby Dodge, *Fine Cooking* test kitchen director; author of *Great Fruit Desserts* (Rizzoli)

"The 1963 *Joy of Cooking* taught me how to make pie crust for blueberry and apple pies. I couldn't have been more than 12, so I'm sure my mom taught me a few tricks, too."

—Amy Albert, associate editor, *Fine Cooking*

"I'd have to say Craig Claiborne's *New York Times Cookbook*. It was a chocolate pie with a meringue and pecan crust. You baked the crust slowly until crisp and chewy and piled in a simple chocolate custard. It worked perfectly, and I was hooked. It was the first cooking I did of any significance, perhaps even the first time I ever followed a recipe, and I remember it vividly."

—Mark Bittman, author of *How to Cook Everything* (Macmillan)

"My sister and I were devotees of the *Betty Crocker Cookbook for Kids*, although I think the only thing I learned to master from that was pretzels. We grew up with the recipe for my mother's famous flaky pie crust, which she had gotten from another navy wife when my father was stationed in the Philippines."

—Susie Middleton, associate editor, *Fine Cooking*

Thai Ingredients Blend into an Explosion of Flavor

Any number of Asian stir-fries begin with garlic cooked in oil. But if you add chiles, kaffir lime leaves, sugar, and fish sauce, a stir-fry takes on a delicious, unmistakably Thai flavor. The result is an explosion of salty, spicy, sweet, and sour flavors that sparkle with personality yet all harmonize on the plate. Indeed, the



Fish sauce may not sound appealing, but used correctly, its flavor is subtle and savory.

art of Thai cooking is combining ingredients at opposite ends of the flavor spectrum—chile paste and coconut milk, palm sugar and lime juice—and balancing them to create vibrantly flavored food.

To create such dishes at home, stock your pantry with

some basic Thai flavorings. Once you understand the main players, you can use them to cook authentic Thai food or to give your own cooking a taste of Thailand.

Fish sauce—the salt of Thai cuisine. Fish sauce, called *nam pla* in Thai or *nuoc mam* in Vietnamese, is used much like salt or soy sauce as a flavor enhancer. It serves as a seasoning in cooked dishes as well as a base for dipping sauces. Made from the liquid drained from fermented anchovies, fish sauce is potent; it's usually combined with other ingredients when used as a dipping sauce. For cooking, you can use it straight, but never add it to a dry pan or the smell will be overpowering.

Like olive oil, there are several grades of fish sauce. High-quality fish sauce, which is the first to be drained off the fermented fish, is usually pale amber, like clear brewed tea. Because it has a more delicate and balanced flavor, I use a premium-grade fish sauce, such as Three Crabs or Phu Quoc brands, in my dipping sauces. For cooking, I'll use stronger-flavored, lower-grade brands, such as Squid or Tiparos, which are made from a secondary draining. Whichever grade I buy, I prefer it in a glass bottle; I find that fish sauces bottled in glass taste better and last longer than those packaged in plastic.

For heat, try fresh and dried chiles and ground chile pastes. If you like hot food,

add chiles and chile paste to just about everything, as the Thais do. I start all my Thai stir-fries by foaming some little fresh bird chiles in hot oil with garlic. If you can't find fresh Thai chiles, use fresh serranos or substitute dried. Chile paste, usually a mix of chiles, garlic, salt, and oil, is the base for many Thai soups, salad dressings, dipping sauces, and stir-fries.



Palm sugar (left) and coconut milk give Thai dishes sweetness.



Chiles, fresh, dried, and made into pastes, are a must for Thai stir-fries.

Coconut milk and palm sugar are the most common sweet ingredients. The sweet element found in most Thai dishes isn't cloying. Instead, it balances the heat and counters the sour notes. Coconut milk, often added to curries, stews, and stir-fries, tones down the heat with its creamy sweetness. Palm sugar, made from the sap of various palm trees, comes packaged in plastic jars or as round cakes. It has a caramel flavor that enhances the salty and sour flavors of a dish. If you can't find palm sugar, substitute light brown or granulated white sugar, increasing the

Experiment with Thai flavors

- ♦ For a delicious barbecue, try marinating meats with fish sauce, soy sauce, sugar, garlic, lemongrass, and chiles.
- ♦ Serve steamed or fried fish with a sauce made with equal parts of fish sauce, water, and sugar, and then accent with garlic, Thai chiles, and a squeeze of lime.
- ♦ For a flavorful Thai salad dressing, blend together lime juice, sugar, fish sauce, lemongrass, chiles, and sliced onions.
- ♦ Rub a chicken with lemongrass, cilantro, chiles, coconut milk, garlic, and fish sauce and roast as usual. Ten minutes before the chicken is done, baste it with the spice mixture and return it to the oven until cooked. This last-minute treatment creates a most aromatic roast chicken.

amount called for by about 20 percent.

Acidic ingredients add vibrancy. Thai cooks use great amounts of tart ingredients, such as lime juice and tamarind juice (made by soaking tamarind pulp in water), to wake up the taste buds. Lemongrass and kaffir lime leaves give a dish a refreshing, lingering lift.

Lemongrass, the most popular herb used in Thailand, is a tall, scallion-like stalk that has a subtle lemony and citrusy flavor and fragrance. Before using, peel away the tough outer layers and crush or chop the stalk to release its flavor.

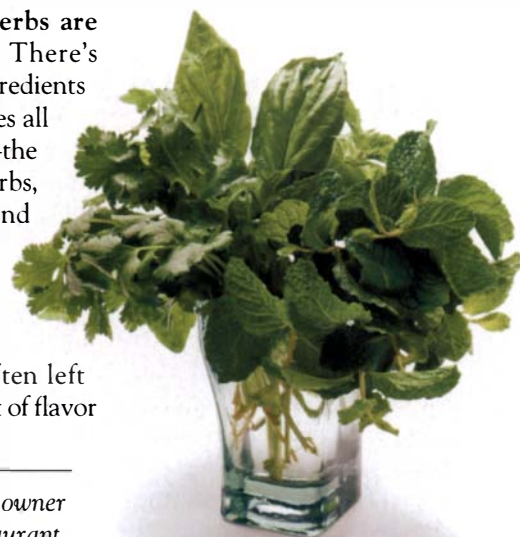


Limes, kaffir lime leaves, or lemongrass add a fragrant, citrusy note.

Kaffir lime leaves impart a most intense floral and citrus flavor and are almost required in Thai curries. Lime zest, while not the same, will give

the dish a similar refreshing citrusy flavor.

Bright, fresh herbs are aromatic finishes. There's another group of ingredients that further enhances all these basic flavors—the aromatics. Fresh herbs, such as basil, mint, and cilantro, are added to finished dishes in great quantities, sometimes by cupfuls, with leaves often left whole to give a burst of flavor with each bite.



Cilantro, basil, and mint leaves—often left whole and added at the end—are frequently used in Thai dishes.

Mai Pham is the chef-owner of Lemon Grass Restaurant & Cafe in Sacramento, California. She wrote The Best of Vietnamese & Thai Cooking. ♦

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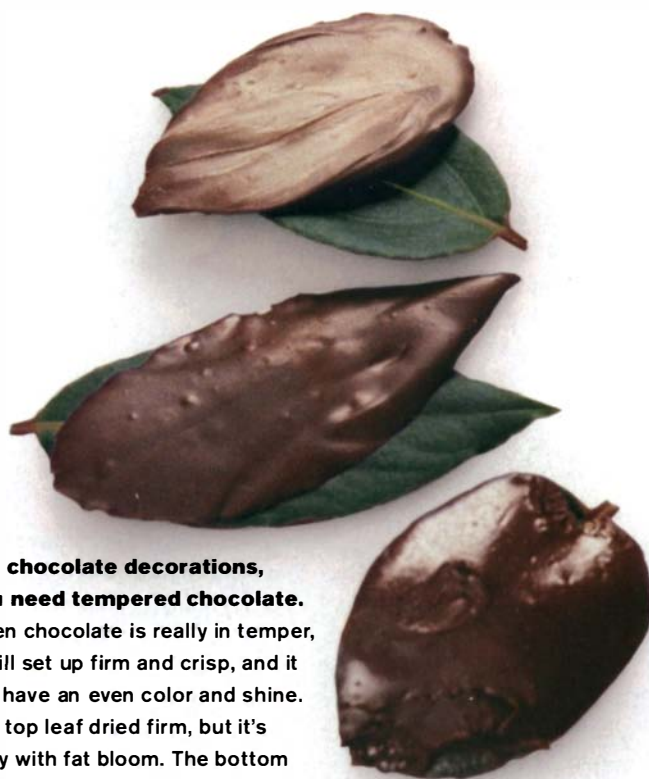
Tempering Chocolate for Texture and Shine

When you examine a top-quality chocolate bar or a well-made dipped truffle, you'll see that the chocolate is shiny, firm enough to tap with your fingernail, and will break with a sharp snap. That's because it's tempered. Tempering is a process that encourages the cocoa butter in the chocolate to harden into a specific crystalline pattern that will produce and maintain these desired traits over a significant length of time.

When chocolate isn't tempered, it can have a number of problems: it may not ever set up hard at room temperature; it may become hard, but it will look dull and blotchy; the internal texture can be

spongy rather than crisp; and it can be susceptible to fat bloom, meaning the fats will migrate to the surface and make whitish streaks and splotches.

Anytime you need chocolate to be firm at room temperature and to have a glossy sheen and a crisp texture—as you would with chocolate nut clusters, dipped candies, or decorations like chocolate leaves, ruffles, curls—you must temper the melted chocolate. For tempering, always use top-quality dark, milk, or white chocolate. (Yes, I know—some people say white chocolate isn't really chocolate. But in this case, the qualifying factor is



For chocolate decorations, you need tempered chocolate. When chocolate is really in temper, it will set up firm and crisp, and it will have an even color and shine. The top leaf dried firm, but it's hazy with fat bloom. The bottom leaf never firmed up; you can see the tacky texture along the bottom edge. Neither was tempered. The middle leaf, of tempered chocolate, is fine.

cocoa butter, which white chocolate does contain.) Compound chocolate, which is a lesser quality chocolate, has other fats in it, so many types don't need to be tempered. Chocolate that's combined with other ingredients, as in a chocolate cake or mousse, doesn't need to be tempered.

What actually happens during tempering?

Tempering seems like a mysterious process because you can't really tell what's happening—you need to learn to control the process only by temperature, by sight, and by touch.

When chocolate is melted and cooled, it can crystallize into any one of six different forms. Unfortunately, only one of these—the beta crystal or Form V—hardens into the firm, shiny chocolate that

cooks want. (Form VI is also a stable, hard crystal, but only small amounts of it will form over time from the Form V crystal.)

How do you get chocolate to set up into beta crystals?

Traditionally, pastry chefs and chocolate manufacturers use one of several tempering methods that all contain the following stages. (To learn one of these methods—the seeding method—see the Master Class on making chocolate truffles on p. 44.)

Stage one: Melting the chocolate so that the cocoa butter melts completely. Most cooking literature advises you not to get chocolate over 120°F for fear of burning the cocoa solids or stimulating the chocolate to irreversibly separate into solids



Take the time to test. When you think the chocolate is in temper, spread a thin layer on a scrap of parchment, wait five minutes, and then try to peel the chocolate from the paper. If you can, and it's not blotchy, you're in business. If not, start the tempering process again.

and fat. Melting curves of chocolate in the technical literature indicate that most of the fats in cocoa butter are melted by 122°F, though some processors recommend heating their chocolate slightly higher—up to 131°F. If you're serious about perfecting tempering, you should consult the manufacturer of the chocolate you're using for the best temperature. Cocoa beans from different locations are very different: at the same temperature, cocoa butter from Malaysian beans grown near the equator will be firm while cocoa butter from Brazilian beans grown in a cool climate will be very soft.

Stage two: rapid cooling to about 82°F for dark chocolate (79°F for milk and white chocolates). This gets the crystallization of the good beta crystals started, but it does allow some undesirable beta-primers to form, too.

Stage three: a slight warming, first back to 86°F for dark (84°F for milk and white) where it's held for a few minutes to let the beta crystals continue to form, and then a final warming to 89° to 91°F for dark and 87° to 89°F for milk and white. This final increase in temperature melts the undesirable beta-prime crystals that were formed.

Always check for those good beta crystals before using the chocolate

To verify that your chocolate is indeed in temper, you can use a couple of tests. One way is to smear some of the chocolate on a piece of parchment or waxed paper. If it dries shiny and hard in five minutes, you're fine. Another method is the "string" test.

When the chocolate is at the final temperature, drizzle a little of the chocolate on the surface of the rest of it. If the drizzle remains visible on the surface for a moment, the chocolate has developed enough beta crystals; if the drizzle disappears instantly, not enough crystals have formed and the chocolate is not tempered. This test is sometimes not fail-safe; occasionally, the melted chocolate can appear to "string" even when it isn't in temper.

A radical approach to tempering that could save time and effort

When you buy blocks or pastilles of good-quality chocolate from the manufacturer, that chocolate is already tempered. Is there a way to just maintain that temper and avoid going through the whole process again? I learned from an internationally renowned chocolate expert, Dr. Paul Dimick, Professor Emeritus of Food Science, Pennsylvania State Univer-



Another way to test the temper. When the chocolate is at its final temperature, let a little bit fall from a spoon back into the bowl. If the drizzles stay visible for a few seconds, the chocolate is probably in temper.

sity, that this is indeed possible. The good beta crystals don't melt until 94°F, so if you never heat chocolate over 91° to 92°F, you won't lose them and your melted chocolate will remain tempered. The trick is to barely melt the chocolate. Chocolate begins to melt at about 89°F. Start by grating or chopping the chocolate so it is finely chopped and will melt quickly and evenly. Put the chocolate

in a metal bowl and warm it over very low heat—an electric heating pad is a neat idea. Stir constantly until about two-thirds of the chocolate is melted. Take the bowl from the heat and continue stirring until all the chocolate is melted. For dark chocolate, you want to end up with the whole mass at 89° to 91°F (87° to 89°F for milk and white). As long as you haven't exceeded 92°F, your beta crystals should be fine and your chocolate is tempered.

You do need to be sure that the chocolate you start out with is in fact truly in temper. Chocolate that has been stored improperly or for a long time may look all right, but it could be on the way to losing its temper.

If you use this "nontempering" tempering method, you still need to do your tests to make sure that the chocolate sets up hard and shiny.

Tips for perfect tempering

♦ **Use a truly accurate thermometer.** Most kitchen thermometers, even the digital instant-read type, can be off by ten degrees. If you like working with chocolate, invest in a laboratory-quality thermometer (see Sources, p. 76).

♦ **Always stir constantly.** One of the major causes of chocolate separating is inadequate stirring, which allows the emulsion of fats and solids to break. Proper stirring also encourages the formation of lots of small beta crystals, and it allows the chocolate to cool quickly, which is good. Alice Medrich uses an immersion blender to constantly stir while cooling, taking care to keep it submerged.

♦ **If you melt chocolate over simmering water, be extremely cautious about steam and splashes.** If just one droplet of water gets into the melting chocolate, the whole mass can seize, which is bad news. For more on seizing, see Food Science in *Fine Cooking* #10, pp. 78–79.

Shirley O. Corriher, a food scientist and a contributing editor to *Fine Cooking*, wrote the award-winning *Cook Wise* (William Morrow). ♦

Polenta

For fresh organic, stone-ground cornmeal, call **Gray's Grist Mill** (508/636-6075) or **Hoppin' John's** (800/828-4412).

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Sear-Roasting

You'll find Anolon and Circulon Professional nonstick pans in many well-stocked kitchen stores; for information on where to buy, call **Meyer** customer service at 800/326-3933.



Chocolate Truffles

For good-quality bittersweet chocolate, try **New York Cake & Baking** (800/942-2539 or 212/675-2253) or **Sweet Celebrations** (800/328-6722). To temper chocolate, you need an accurate thermometer with clearly defined one-degree increments between 70° and 130°F. The sources above sell chocolate thermometers for about \$15. Or try **Sur La Table** (800/243-0852) or **Component**

Design NW (800/338-5594) which sell them for \$12.95.

Ice-Cream Machines

Ice-cream machines are sold at kitchenware stores across the country. For mail-order sources, try **Zabar's** (800/697-6301 or, within New York, 212/496-1234) or **Chef's Catalog** (800/967-2433), which sell the Simac Magnum and Cuisinart machines. Zabar's also sells the Krups La Glaciere. For the Donvier or the White Mountain manual and electric models, try **Sur La Table** (800/243-0852).

Mu-Shu Pork

If you can't find cloud ears (also called wood ears) and golden needles in your supermarket or local Chinese market, try the **Oriental Pantry**, 800/828-0368 (orientalpantry.com).

Frangipane

For raw or blanched almonds, call **Sultan's Delight** at 800/852-5046 or visit sultansdelight.com. For a 2-inch deep 8-inch cake pan like the one Flo Braker uses for her phyllo Pithiviers, call **Sweet Celebrations** (800/328-6722) or **New York Cake & Baking** (800/942-2539 or 212/675-2253). Magic Line makes an excellent heavy-duty rimmed 10x15-inch sheet pan; order it from **La Cuisine** (800/521-1176). **Bridge Kitchenware** (call 800/274-3435 or, within New York, 212/838-1901) carries a similar model.

Artisan Foods

Scharffen Berger chocolate is available in many specialty stores, by mail from the factory at 800/930-4528. Or visit their web site: scharffen-berger.com.

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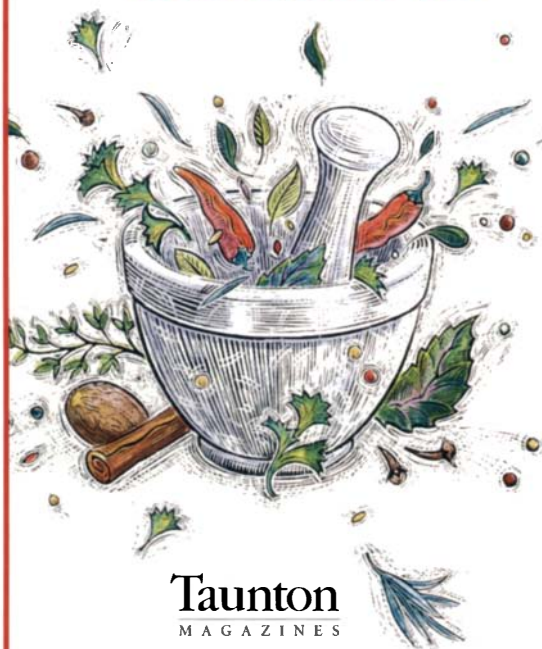
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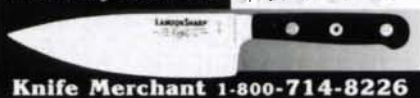
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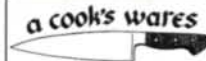
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NUTRITION INFORMATION

Recipe (analysis per serving)	Page	Calories		Protein (g)	Carb (g)	Fats (g)				Chol (mg)	Sodium (mg)	Fiber (g)	Notes
		total	from fat			total	sat	mono	poly				
Basic Polenta with water	25	140	35	3	23	4	2	1	0.5	10	630	2	based on 4 servings
Basic Polenta with water & milk	25	210	70	7	29	8	5	2	1	25	680	2	
Caramelized Cabbage on Polenta	25	240	110	11	25	12	4	6	1	25	1,130	6	
Pork with Onions over Polenta	26	630	240	32	63	26	9	13	3	100	1,430	8	
Gratin of Polenta with Greens	27	250	120	7	27	14	3	8	2	10	730	4	
Boneless Chicken Breast	30	410	200	38	16	22	4	12	5	185	570	2	
Steak au Poivre	31	440	250	39	4	27	12	13	2	145	790	1	
Sear-Roasted Salmon Fillets	31	290	170	27	0	19	5	9	4	85	680	0	w/1 tsp. of the butter
Classic Meatloaf	33	600	410	36	11	45	17	20	5	180	1,270	1	based on 6 servings
Braised Leeks & Mushrooms	36	150	90	4	10	10	4	5	1	10	260	2	
Braised Red Cabbage with Zinfandel	37	250	60	3	41	7	1	5	1	0	400	4	
Braised Winter Squash & Potatoes	37	200	60	5	33	6	4	2	0	15	620	4	
French Chicken in White Wine Sauce	41	510	260	51	5	29	11	10	5	165	1,310	1	
Indian Chicken with Coconut Milk	42	610	370	49	10	42	20	12	6	140	790	2	
Chicken with Mexican Tomato Sauce	42	520	280	48	14	31	9	13	5	135	730	2	
Classic Chocolate Truffles	49	90	70	1	8	7	4	2	0	5	5	0	per 1-inch truffle
Mandarin Pancakes	56	80	10	2	14	1.5	0	0.5	0.5	0	0	0	per 7-inch pancake
Mandarin Sauce	57	40	10	1	8	1	0	0.5	0.5	0	330	0	per tablespoon
Mu-Shu Pork	57	170	100	13	4	12	2	6	3	165	800	1	
Prune-Apricot Frangipane Tart	62	240	140	4	22	16	7	6	2	65	20	1	per bar (1/30th recipe)
Frangipane Ripple Chocolate Cake	63	320	160	4	38	18	10	6	1	80	75	2	per slice (1/20th recipe)
Frangipane-Phyllo <i>Pithiviers</i>	64	380	270	7	22	30	13	12	4	130	115	2	
Sausage & Pepper Stew	82	750	500	27	39	56	18	28	7	110	1,600	7	

The nutritional analyses have been calculated by a registered dietitian at The Food Consulting Company of San Diego, California. When a recipe gives a choice of ingredients, the first choice is the one used in

the calculations. Optional ingredients and those listed without a specific quantity are not included. When a range of ingredient amounts or servings is given, the smaller amount or portion is used.

A Hearty Stew That's Quick to Cook

This herb-infused sausage stew is the kind of dinner my Italian relatives put together at a moment's notice. Only they'd call it a *spezzatino*, which means meat that's cut up and stewed. Instead of cutting the sausages, however, I cook them whole so they don't give off too much fat into the stew. Though sausages take a little longer to cook through when left whole, they stay nice and juicy. I also like the heat from the spicy sausages, but you can certainly mix sweet and spicy or try another variety of sausage altogether.

The addition of pasta, although not traditional, makes this a wonderful one-pot (actually a one-skillet) meal. For those of you fond of sausage and pepper grinders, skip the pasta and serve the stew with some hearty bread. Just cut back on the water by about a cup.

You can certainly fool around with this recipe. Artichoke hearts, olives, or a small dice of eggplant would make delicious additions. A little oregano and a pinch of red chile flakes would also taste good. But do keep the mint. Cooked with the sausage, it loses its overtly minty character yet adds a depth of flavor that makes this simple dish a standout.

Clifford Wright is the author of Italian Pure & Simple (William Morrow), as well as two forthcoming books on Mediterranean food and history. ♦



Sausage & Pepper Stew

Push the pasta down into the soup to keep it submerged rather than adding more water, which would dilute the stew's flavor. *Serves four.*

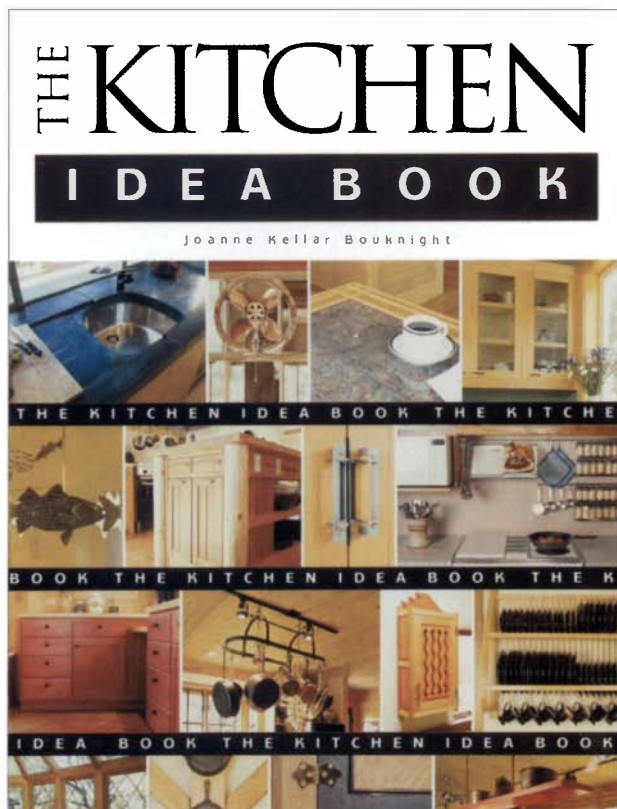
3 Tbs. extra-virgin olive oil
1½ lb. hot Italian sausages
1 medium onion, thinly sliced
4 large cloves garlic, finely chopped
3 green bell peppers, cored, seeded, and cut into thin strips

28-oz. can tomatoes, drained and chopped
2 cups water
¾ cup uncooked small pasta, such as tubetti, ditali, or shells
5 sprigs fresh basil and 5 sprigs fresh mint, tied together in a bouquet garni
Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

In a large skillet with a lid, heat the olive oil over medium-high heat. Add the sausages and onion; cook, turning the sausages to brown all sides,

until the onions are just tender, about 8 min. Add the garlic and bell peppers and cook another couple of minutes. Add the tomatoes, water, pasta, basil, mint, salt, and pepper (make sure the pasta is submerged). Raise the heat to high and cook until the liquid starts to boil. Turn the heat to medium-low, cover, and simmer until the sausages feel firm and the pasta is tender, about 25 min. Cut the sausages into slices or leave whole for serving.

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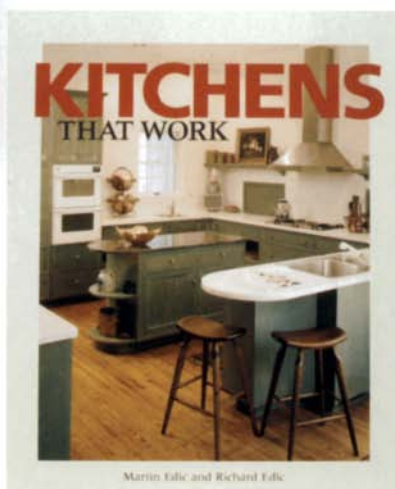


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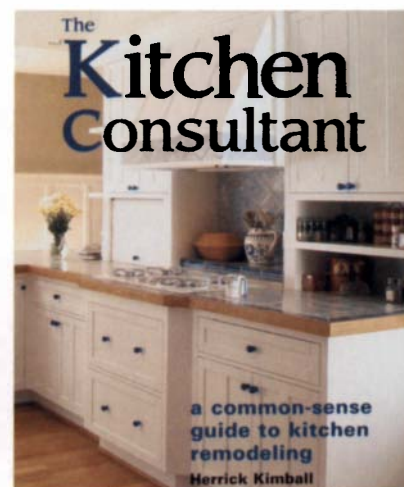
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Handmade Chocolate from Bean to Bar



The chocolate blend contains cocoa beans from Brazil, Venezuela, Jamaica, Papua New Guinea, and Ghana. Each variety is roasted separately so its full flavor and aroma come through. A high proportion of cocoa beans gives this chocolate its intensity.

John Scharffenberger and Robert Steinberg, makers of Scharffen Berger chocolate, are currently the only artisans in America who make chocolate starting from the cocoa bean. "People ask why we don't buy pre-mixed chocolate liquor, but you can't control the flavor the way you can when you buy and roast your own beans," says Steinberg. Scharffenberger (left) is a former winemaker who analyzes chocolate flavors in the same way as he did wine; Steinberg (right), a physician with a longtime passion for the flavor and science of chocolate, studied chocolate-making and apprenticed in France. The duo's hands-on approach results in a chocolate

that's silky, fruity, intense—and strikingly sophisticated.



Cocoa beans, sugar, and whole-bean vanilla are crushed by granite rollers to make chocolate liquor. The chocolate liquor then goes to the conche-refiner to evaporate excess moisture and acidity, and to be ground so fine that the mouth no longer perceives it as individual particles. This is a matter of microns, but proper conching and refining has much to do with the finished chocolate's flavor balance and silky texture or "mouth feel."



After heating, cooling, and heating again in a tempering kettle ("basically, a huge double boiler," says Steinberg) the chocolate is poured into molds. Chocolate that's in "good temper" has a high sheen, a crisp, clean snap, and melts slowly in your mouth.



The bars are removed from the molds by hand, their edges shaved to smooth irregularities. The bittersweet, semisweet, and unsweetened chocolate bars are now ready for wrapping.



Photos: Ben Fink